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Edited by

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THE EPISTLES TO THE COLOSSIANS AND THESSALONIANS

By

JOSEPH PARKER, D.D.

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THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

INTRODUCTION

TO my own heart Paul is always at his best. Other men move on varying levels and are the subjects or the victims of whim and mood, but to my love and my soul's hunger Paul is always the faithful steward and generous almoner of the divine grace. The Pastoral Epistles are catholic, and the Catholic Epistles are pastoral; the great sermons are letters to the heart, and the great Epistles are clothed with all the best attributes of Gospel preaching. The unity of Paul's mind and heart may be regarded as one of the proofs of his apostleship. In this Epistle, as in others, Paul beneficently spreads himself over the whole necessity of the inner life of man—he is mystic, transcendental, doctrinal, pastoral, domestic, social, and through all and above

all he is intensely devout. At once he stands up in his full apostolic stature, in holy consciousness of his divine call, and in full assurance that he is in trust of the unsearchable riches of Christ; and in that hour of expansion and transfiguration there be few who dare approach him except in an attitude of admiring and grateful obeisance. Then almost suddenly, and with infinite simplicity and elder-brotherhood, he sits down on the common house-chair and talks to the husband and the wife, the parent and the child, the master and the servant; he becomes a household friend—he does not enter the family as a usurper or a revolutionist, but as a friend, a brother, a counsellor, a very fountain of sympathy. Paul suffuses the whole family life with the highest Christian sentiment, and it is as if the house-life were subtly penetrated by an unguent from the Holy One. "It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments." There is no mistaking the fragrance, the perfume, the new sensation

of pleasure. Life is instantly lifted to a new level, invested with a new power, cheered by a new hope. Here and there the inspired Apostle comes down upon a kind of Christian Sinai, and delivers as by right ten commandments, and ten more, in the name of the Triune God. Thunder and lightning, rending storm and quaking rocks, there are none; yet the commandments are of full number, and God's own red seal is upon the throbbing and clamant decalogue. The Apostle makes no apology, asks for no concession, suggests no compromise; the Christian Sinai is as peremptory and final in its law-giving as was the Sinai of Moses. Read the new Sinaitic code as written by the later Moses and compare it with the first Decalogue:

> "Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds."
>
> "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, . . . bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering."

"Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another."

"Put on charity."

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."

"Wives, submit yourselves."

"Husbands, love your wives."

"Servants, obey your masters."

"Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal."

"Walk in wisdom toward them that are without."

Where, then, is the plea that the new Sinai is a barren rock and life a licence wanton and uncontrolled? Moses stood on a mountain to receive the law, Jesus sat on a mountain to pronounce the Beatitudes, and from a kind of Serbal Paul delivers his expanded decalogue, and in doing so he is a figure at once solitary and majestic. Jesus is always beautiful to me in quite a tender and winning way when He talks about flowers, and sheep, and birds, and sevenfold is He in winsomeness when He takes little children in his arms and blesses them.

So Paul, the vehement reasoner and the Felix-smiting accuser, is approachable and most lovesome when he puts the hand of the husband into the hand of the wife and weds them in a deepening love before the altar of Christ, and when he brings master and servant face to face and bids them care honestly and worthily for one another. A sweet thing it is to have the Gospel, whose beginning is in eternity, thus brought immediately and condescendingly into the house and constituted a factor in the daily life.

How deeply anxious the Apostle is that we should all be better men! He does not seek our admiration; he claims our obedience to Christ. He does not come to decorate the house, but in the grace of God to recreate the householder. The cogency of his reasoning adds to the passion of his appeal. With less logic Paul would have less love. This is no paradox, but a simple commonplace; it is really because he reasons conclusively that Paul loves so ardently. As a well-equipped reasoner, Paul sees the case through and through in all its complication, yet in all

its unity, and for that reason his heart loves wherever his mind perceives. What a privilege to hold communion with a mind like Paul's! He invites us to the very fellowship of his soul. In our degree we, by companionship, become as he is, and we are permitted to reflect in shadowed glory somewhat of his unique and burning lustre. In his own degree Paul was as unique and solitary as Jesus—often as unapproachable, often as condescending. Remember these great Epistles were written as if for the private reading of the church, or were meant to do a circular service amongst other churches; they were not meant to be articles of merchandise and to be sold in the public market-place. They were in very deed letters of solicitous love. They are not what we now call pieces of literature; they are heart-blood, vital messages, gospels that had not only been received, but had been strenuously loved and tested and finally approved by one of the greatest minds known to human history. The Epistles are authoritative too. If now and again Paul ventured an opinion of his own he definitely marked it as such, and in a way

distrusted it—otherwise he spoke in the imperative mood, as if speaking in the name of Jesus. The imperativeness of Pauline teaching admits of no doubt, and that imperativeness was the more vigorous as it was the more remarkable, because it was applied to the greatest of all subjects and the most exacting of all claims.

Let us quietly read Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, first as a summary and then lovingly verse by verse, and see whether these comments are not fully sustained.

> Paul (whose only title now is an Apostle of Jesus Christ, who used to be a Pharisee of the Pharisees, proud with the pride of ancestry and conceited by the recollection of self-righteousness, but now an apostle of the Lamb of God) desires for you grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Timotheus and I give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

praying always for you with a most tender heart ever since we heard the blessed news of your strong faith in Christ Jesus, a faith which has been amply proved by the love which ye have to all the saints, on account of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye have heard before at the very moment of your first conversion in the word of the truth of the Gospel. You have received a blessing which is intended not for you only, but for all the ages of mankind, and, indeed, already is the new morning brightening on the hills of time, and all nations shall see it and rejoice in its infinite gladness. The fruit of this blessed Gospel is like the fruit of an orchard which spreads itself over the whole earth. We greet you as fruitful Christians. We have testimony on your behalf which we would rather magnify than ignore, for Epaphras has told us of your love in the Spirit. We never cease to pray for you, and to desire

that ye may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. This Gospel is no mere sentiment; it is always to be associated with knowledge and wisdom and understanding. You are remarkable for your courtesy and for your desire to please all with whom you come in contact, and thus you prove in one distinct sense that you are fruitful in good works, and daily increasing in the knowledge of God. Continue to walk worthily of the Lord. Walk worthy of the vocation with which you are called. You are called to walk worthily of the Lord Jesus Christ, seeing that you have in Him a glorious and perfect example. We not only pray for you, but we give thanks unto the Father, which hath made us together with you meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light. We are as truly "made" in our highest character as the sun was "made" by the omnipotence of God.

He who made the sun also makes the brighter light of Christian character. You have no longer any relation to darkness, you are translated from darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son—just as a race of men may be translated or transferred from one colony to another, or from one kingdom to another. You are not only liberated from darkness, you are admitted into light. All this comes through the redemption wrought by the blood of Christ, even the forgiveness of sins; for Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. He was begotten before all creation, begotten before all worlds. Jesus Christ is the supreme Personality, the Creator of all things: the heavens are His and the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers; all things were created by the Lord who redeemed you. They were not only created by Him, but for Him. He

is a glorious Lord. He is the Head of the Church, the firstborn from the dead; in all things He has the pre-eminence; in Him all fulness dwells. It is in His gracious and glorious name that we write this letter of love, this epistle of instruction, exhortation, direction, and comfort. You must always think of Christ as the origin and source of redeeming love. With Christ redemption was not an idea only, a mere effort of the mind even in its supremest moments—it was a shedding of blood, the very blood of His heart, for only by such shedding could He work out the mystery of redemption. There is no peace but through the blood of the Cross. We do not forget that, like ourselves, you were sometimes alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works—all mankind were in the same condemnation; but now we are reconciled by the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ, one object of that priesthood being to

present all believers unblamable and unreprovable in the divine sight. You are not to boast of this as if it were your own doing. You must never relax discipline. You must continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel; if you would be saved, you must endure unto the end. Christ has left to us a legacy of suffering. In a sense we have to fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ. The Christian faith is no luxury. We lie on no bed of roses; for my own part I have to suffer, and to suffer until my very agony becomes my supreme joy. I thank God that I have seen the mystery of redemption, and felt its gracious and uplifting power. I have indeed now become a minister, being made one according to the dispensation of God. At first I did not see clearly the whole divine purpose; but now I can look backward into the mystery of eternity,

and forward into the mystery of evolution, and in the exercise of this enabling power I can preach Christ, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom. Our object as Christian ministers is to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

I have had great conflict for you and about you, and also for them at Laodicea, and for many who have not seen my face in the flesh. There is an invisible as well as a visible Church; there is a Church that can be seen in the flesh, but physical sight does not constitute the Church. Many beyond the range of our observation should be bound up in our solicitude and in our tenderest prayer. We have prayed much for those whom we have not seen. We want them to see the mystery of light, and to rejoice in the new morning. Increase of knowledge is one of the guarantees of our spiritual security. Let no man beguile you with enticing

words. There are many smooth tongues that would by fair speeches deceive the very elect. You see how deeply interested I am in your well-being, for though I am absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ. Do not give way to reverie and self-indulgent contemplation, but walk in Christ. If I may change the figure, you must be rooted and built up in Him, and stablished in the faith. All this comes little by little: children born yesterday do not grow into men to-morrow. Again and again I say there are many false philosophies and vain deceits seeking to ensnare and disable you. Live in Christ. In Him alone dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. You are only complete in the degree in which you abide in Him. Trust nothing to circumcision or to any form of ritual. Be circumcised in your hearts, and put off the

body of the sins of the flesh; go down with Christ into the river of His suffering, and into the grave of His humiliation, and in due time you shall share His honour, and sit with Him on His throne. Many think that they are good because they have been circumcised with hands. You must get rid of this mischievous fallacy. Christianity is not a ceremony—it is a faith, a redemption, a sanctification. Christ has put all ordinances in their right places, and their handwriting which was against us He has taken out of the way, and has nailed it to His cross.

There are others who will plague you about meat and drink, and holydays and new moons. Pay no attention to them. Remember that your completeness is in Christ. Whatever was good in ordinances and rituals and ceremonies was but a shadow of something better. The body is of Christ. There

are many curious theories going abroad to-day. There is a theory of voluntary humility; there is also a peculiar theory of angel worship; there is an intrusion into things which cannot yet be seen. All this ends in being vainly puffed up by a fleshly mind, and it is always marked by the cruellest schism of all, which is the cutting off of the soul from the Christ, the Head, the Son of God. Of course, your faith is but young—you have hardly escaped some of the rudiments of the world; yet in Christ you are free—free from ordinances, free from the commandments and doctrines of men, free from all the beggarly elements of the world. Live in the sunshine. Know that ye are the children of the morning and that the spirit of darkness has no claim upon you.

Prove that you are risen with Christ by seeking those things which are above; set your affection on things above, withdrawing it wholly from

things on the earth. Realise the fact that your life is hid with Christ in God. Expect Christ to appear, and know that when He appears you shall also appear with Him in glory. As to all that is rough and degrading in human life, cut it off as with a two-edged sword, and have no relation to it. Do not try to blow away the darkness with your own breath, but bring to bear upon it the sunlight of a holy faith and a continual obedience. You have been clothed with the garments of the evil one—anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communications out of your mouth. Put off all these things as you would put off detestable garments, and walk in the white raiment of holiness. Discard the old man with his deeds, and remember that you have put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him. Get out of all narrow prejudices, all limited circles, all local and perishing patriotisms, and enter into that new

fellowship, that spiritual and indissoluble brotherhood, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free; but Christ is all in all. If I have told you to put off the old man with his deeds, I must further tell you to put on bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering. These are the King's robes; these are the wedding garments that will entitle you to a high place at the feast of love. Forgive one another. Let your forgiveness be greater than your quarrelsomeness. As Christ forgave you, so you ought to forgive other people. Whatever else you put on as clothing for the soul, be sure to put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. You will know that you are properly clothed as to the soul by your relation to the peace of God. When that holy dove broods within your soul know that the kingdom of heaven is nigh at hand. Have no vain theories, inventions,

conceits, or fantastic conjectures about holy things, but let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. Make Jesus Christ the beginning and the end of all your words and all your deeds. In these matters we speak to men, women, and children; to wives, that they may be gentle and responsive to all love; to husbands,that they may magnify the privileges and the joys of wedded life; to children, that they may obey their parents in all things; to fathers, that they provoke not their children to anger; to servants, that they may so work as to prove that labour has a dignity of its own, and that its reward is not of privilege, but of right. My brethren, whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; then you will not be dependent upon public opinion, but upon divine grace, for the issue and the benediction of your lives.

When the word of Christ dwells in you richly and prevails above all other words, masters will be just to their servants, and servants will be just to their masters. The true socialism is an aspect of prayer and of thanksgiving—indeed, it is the second commandment which is impossible apart from the first. Pray for us. Pray that we may have larger opportunities for doing good; pray that we may pass from bondage to liberty. Take care how you behave yourselves to them which are without; they are watching you, so I pray that your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man. Tychicus is coming to you—he is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you with messages of love, and with inquiries of hopeful solicitude. Many here kiss their hands to you and send tokens of brotherhood; for example, Aristarchus, and Marcus, and Justus.

One of your own slaves is here, I mean Epaphras, and he saluteth you. You have no idea how this man loves you, and prays fervently for you, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. You can hardly imagine how fervent is his zeal towards you. Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, both greet you. Give my love to the brethren which are in Laodicea, and to Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. Read this epistle wherever you have an opportunity. Speak kind words to Archippus about his ministry; may he always remember that his ministry was not the gift of man, but a direct trust from the Lord Jesus. I wave my hand towards you in token of loving brotherhood. When you think of me, think of my bonds. Sometimes the chain is very heavy, but the burden can be prayed away. Farewell, brother beloved,—Grace be with you. Amen.

PRAYER BEFORE PERUSAL

Spirit of the living God, be pleased to open my eyes that I may see this vision of truth and grace, in all its tender beauty. Thou hast most mercifully sent great hearts to teach us what they know of the mystery and the power of Thy love. For all their comforting words we bless Thee, for they are in very truth words full of light and peace. Carry my soul far from all the noises of the world and give me to hear the music of Thine own voice, sounding in the human tones of such a man as was the Apostle Paul. For his conversion I bless Thee, as for the creation of a new world. May the fire of his spirit kindle my heart, and may the wholeness of his consecration lift me above all the distractions and temptations of time. Beyond all the apostolic eloquence may I hear the still small voice of the Cross, and through all the strenuous argument may I feel the almighty constraint of atoning and redeeming love Amen.

CHAPTER I

SOMETIMES the value of a letter depends almost wholly upon the known personality of the writer. Even the greatest subjects seldom lose either in dignity or in utility by the fact that they are not anonymous. The most of the Epistles in the New Testament are what we should call "signed documents." Even the Epistle to the Hebrews may be Pauline without its having been written directly by the hand of the illustrious Apostle. There may be said to be a Mosaic literature which Moses did not personally write. So also there is a Pauline literature, even though spoken and written by other men; we know that style by its strength, its spirituality, its grasp of doctrine, its intense and even passionate enthusiasm. The style of Paul is not only that of an expositor—not infrequently it is the style

of a legislator. Paul is something more than a preacher. He gave "commandment" unto the churches in Galatia. He did not hesitate to set himself up as a type or pattern of the Christian life, and call upon others to be "imitators" of him, as he himself was a follower of Christ. Yet Paul was full of humility. He never called himself *the* Apostle, as if he were the only apostle; in this case, as in others, he is simply Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ. Yet we cannot escape the difference between him and any other apostle. His noble egotism, so infinitely different from vanity, shines through all the sublime subjects, and gives them a kind of incarnation. As Jesus Christ was the incarnation of God, so, in a broad sense, Paul was the incarnation of the spirit of Jesus Christ.

> Verses 1, 2: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul did not mix up the Church and the nation. He separated the saints and faithful

brethren in Christ from all the other inhabitants of Colosse. It is of importance to notice that the letter was not addressed to the inhabitants of Colosse, but to the Christian souls specially gathered into fellowship in that city. The Church of Christ is not to be confused with the commonalty of citizenship. This is a vital principle in the creed of many Christians. We are not Christians because we belong to the nation; we are a special influence in the nation, as those who live in Jesus Christ and obey His rule. Taking the words as they stand, who can think that Paul regarded the Lord Jesus Christ simply as a man? If the juncture of names, as we here find it, occurred only once in the apostolic Epistles, there might be some controversy as to its proper meaning—it might even be challenged as a spurious reading—but the conjunction is frequent, so frequent, indeed, as to be identical in the value of the names which are thus associated. We could not imagine the Apostle saying, "Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from a fellow-creature who was murdered

by the Romans a few years ago." Such a union of names would amount to blasphemy. The very position which is assigned to Christ in all such salutations is proof enough that the Apostles regarded Jesus Christ as worthy of equal honour with the Father. The salutation forms a channel through which the heart of the Apostle is about to flow in tender and comforting expression.

> Verses 3–5: "We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, for the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel."

Who does not thank God for an abounding harvest? Who can refrain from thanking God in the presence of a luxuriant landscape? Who can keep back a spiritual song when he stands amid the splendour of high summer? It was in some such way that the Apostle thanked God for the development of the Christian life in the Christians of Colosse. Who can refrain from expressing the desire that a great harvest may be safely

gathered in? Who would not pray that the tempest or the chilling wind may be kept back until the wheat-fields, the olive-yards, and the orchards should be completely reaped? In some such way the Apostle desired that the Colossian Christians should be kept from all destructive influences, that their faith and their love might be perfected in some still higher expression. Not only does the Apostle thank God for what has already been seen in Colosse—he would regard the dawn as only the precursor of the full day. We are reminded that Christian reputation makes itself known in very effective ways. The fame of this church was not confined to its own city. The Apostle had heard that there were people at Colosse whose faith and love were not only conspicuous, but pre-eminent. Piety creates its own fame. In writing to the Philippians the Apostle shows that unfaithfulness creates its own infamy; in that epistle he speaks of some who were "the enemies of the cross of Christ." Why does the Apostle speak so much of heaven, heavenly places, and heavenly citizenship in these epistles of the captivity? Is he nearing

the better land? Has he caught some odour in the wind which must have come from the unseen gardens?

> Verse 6: "Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth."

The Apostle will have the Gospel recognised as universal. He associated it with "all the world." Other religions were local. Paganism had its village and its temple, cut off, probably, from other villages and other temples; but Christianity was a temple whose only roof was the sky. The Apostle seems to regard himself as a special registrar, whose office it was to mark the progress of the Christian cause over the face of the whole earth. The Apostle connects the Colossian church with the universal brotherhood of Christians. He tells the Colossians that they are only part of a whole, and that if they could see things as he sees them they would rejoice that the Christian orchards, loaded and blossoming with precious fruit, were only bounded by the horizon. We are

thus comforted by the general outlook. A man may be imprisoned as well as sheltered by the valley. He should often climb the mountain and see how fruitful fields are rejoicing, as it were, under the full light of the divine blessing. England should be comforted by progress in India. America should rejoice because of the good news from far-off Africa.

Verse 7: "As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellow-servant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ."

It is wonderful to notice how the Apostle seems to have special lines of communication with all the cities in which the Gospel has been preached. Paul was the greatest Christian traveller of his day. He seemed to keep an intelligence bureau, for he knew everything that was going on in all the churches which God had enabled him to plant. In one way or another Paul keeps himself fully apprised of the Christian situation. Epaphras may be the short form of Epaphroditus, not necessarily the Epaphroditus mentioned in the Epistle to the

Philippians. It is beautiful to think of Epaphras as being a native of Colosse, and as being what we should now call "a native evangelist." By-and-by he acquired what we may call "a larger spiritual jurisdiction," doing Christian work not only in Colosse, but in the neighbouring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Epaphras was a teacher through whose ministrations the Colossians had come to know, even with perfectness, the grace of God. Paul never undervalues the younger ministry. Probably there never was a more appreciative spirit in the Christian Church than the Apostle Paul's. Wherever he can bring in another name as a fellow-labourer, he does so with the warmest cordiality. In this case Epaphras is "our dear fellow-servant," and he is represented also as "a faithful minister of Christ."

> Verses 8, 9: "Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit. For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."

The Apostle rejoices in spiritual intelligence. He did not say, We rejoice that

your numbers are tenfold more than they were when we last heard of you. He says nothing about increase of funds, or property, or endowment, or worldly patronage. He rejoices that he had learned from Epaphras that the Colossians were growing in love in the Spirit. This should be a lesson to all pastors and churches. No church is either poor or weak which is strong in love. No church is either poor or weak which is associated with the personality and ministry of the Holy Ghost. The day will surely come when we shall not ask questions in statistics, but shall listen with eagerness and gratitude to every report by which we are assured that the churches of Christ are growing in grace. The Apostle does not pray that the Colossian church might have larger funds, more perfect apparatus, or more elaborate organisation; he desires that they "might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding." This is but another variation of the Lord's command: "Seek first the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you." Where the life

is right it will suggest and develop its own proper organisation and environment. The first consideration should be the spiritual condition of the heart, a supreme and importunate desire to know God's will more perfectly, and to get into that higher region which is infinitely above the dry intellect, and is called here "spiritual understanding." We are to grow in spiritual genius, in spiritual sensitiveness, and in spiritual consecration.

> Verses 10–12: "That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."

What a great prayer is this! How like the great prayer offered for the Ephesians! How unlike the petty prayers which the Church is often tempted to offer! The Apostle would have Christians "walk worthy of the Lord." This is the practical aspect of the prayer. Christianity is not reverie—it is action, it is discipline. Paul would

have Christians "walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing," inspired by a general disposition to make a highway for the Gospel by the amiability, the benignity, the well-doing which must always be associated with the spirit of love. The Apostle was not commending "man-pleasing," for this he always repudiated and denounced. He would have men walk so as to please God. If we please God, we shall, in the highest sense, make rough places plain and crooked places straight, and men will welcome us as those who do not create difficulties, but who make all things beautiful, because righteous. The Apostle would have Christians "strengthened with all might." The very strength of the divine glory should show itself in their lives. He would have the Christian life a thankful song, because a clear and grateful appreciation "of the inheritance of the saints in light." Every vision of heaven he would turn into a new service for man. Every difficulty upon the earth he would melt away by a clearer vision of the saints who walk in light. Thus the world should act and react, and out of the continual action there should

come help and comfort and joy according to our daily need.

> Verse 13: "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son."

Paul always had a reason, even for his exclamations. He would have nothing merely emotional or sentimental. Even his gardens had rocks underneath. This verse affords an admirable illustration; for whilst he is in the very midst of an exhortation, pointing towards rapture and entranced delight, he reminds the Colossians of the great redemption by which they had been brought into circumstances calling for psalms and hallelujahs. He reminds the Colossians that once, like the rest of the world, they had been under the power of darkness—that they were only translated into the kingdom of Jesus Christ by the miracle of the Cross. It was a favourite practice of the Apostle's to remind Christians of the mire and the clay, the sin and the confusion, out of which they had been brought. He reminded the Ephesians that once they were dead in trespasses

and sins, and now he reminds the Colossians that they had been under the power of darkness. Look into the hole out of which you were digged would seem to be a note in the Apostle's argument and exhortation. This practice was peculiarly opportune in connection with the preceding call to dwell upon the great glory that was to be revealed in the higher experience and the remoter life of spiritual development. We are never to forget that we are the subjects of redemption; and we are never to forget that our redemption is a work of divine grace. "Translated" is, in this text, equivalent to "transplanted," as if we had been brought out of one race into another—out of a lower stratum into a higher. A very tender expression is "His dear Son," or, more literally, "the Son of His love." God is love. Jesus is the Son of God; therefore He is the Son of God's love.

Verse 14: "In whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins."

This never could be said of any merely human creature. Surely there is infinitely

more than the mere humanity of Jesus Christ indicated by these thrilling words. The Apostle was never afraid of the word "blood." He did not take the narrow and revolting view of blood—he recognised all its ideal and sacramental and sacrificial aspects and issues. We ourselves have first vulgarised the word, and then with false sentiment we have revolted from it. The blood is the life. Jesus Christ laid down His life for us—not part of His life, nor part of His duration. His work is not a parenthesis in time or in the evolution of history. He gave His blood for us, and He gave it from before the foundation of the world. The great blessing received through the Atonement by blood is the "forgiveness of sins." This is a Gospel word, a grand evangelical doctrine—the very characteristic note of the Christian revelation. Only they who are forgiven through the blood of Christ can enter into the mystery represented by the Cross. This doctrine is not a thesis to be elaborated and discussed; it is a vital experience through which the soul must pass if ever it is to realise and enjoy "the peace which passeth all understanding."

The people amongst whom Jesus Christ lived had no hesitation in upholding the doctrine that "only God could forgive sins." This was one of the accusations they brought against the Christ, that He usurped the place of God in declaring to a man that his sins were all forgiven. We believe, therefore, that Jesus Christ was more than man—more than a sublime revelation of God. We have no difficulty in declaring that in Christ dwelt the fulness of the Godhead bodily. There are undoubtedly great mysteries and difficulties connected with this conception of the personality and priesthood of Jesus Christ. The mysteries and difficulties have never been denied. But if we were to turn away from them, we should only turn towards mysteries and difficulties greater still. My own feeling is that there is more presumption in denial than in belief. I am continually comforted by the doctrine that "it is better to choose the mystery of light than to choose the mystery of darkness." The Apostle Paul had a great doctrine regarding the personality of Christ. These are his words:

> Verses 15–20: "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him: and He is before all things, and by Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself; by Him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven."

These words may be profitably read again and again, so profound is their conception of the dominion of God. Language cannot more clearly indicate the more than human quality of Jesus Christ. Can any man be said to be "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature"? These words alone exclude the idea of the mere humanity of Jesus Christ. But these are not the only words used by the Apostle. Of what man ever known to us could it be said: "By Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, . . . all things were created by Him, and for Him: and He is before all things, and by Him all

things consist"? These proofs of the deity of Christ have been accounted sufficient by generations of saintly theologians. It is absolutely certain that these terms would be out of place if used as a description of any mortal being. We are here in the midst of a sublime and overpowering vision of personal glory. Compare these words with the terms in which Jesus Christ's earthly life is described in many texts. The Son of man had "not where to lay His head," yet "by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible." He sat on the well, weary with His journey, yet He created thrones and dominions and principalities and powers. The two conditions of being should always be realised, because those who believe most profoundly in the deity of Christ also believe most profoundly in His humanity. The history of Christ is full of contrasts. He is "a root out of a dry ground," yet He is "the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys." "There is no beauty that we should desire Him," yet He is the "fairest among ten thousand," and "altogether lovely." He was "despised and

rejected of men," yet He is "the desire of all nations."

In the eighteenth verse Jesus Christ is represented as the Head of the Church. The word "He" is emphatic—He, even He, or He Himself. The "He" is as emphatic in relation to the Church as in relation to the image of God. What is the meaning of the word "church" in this connection? Is not the meaning profoundly spiritual? There is an ecclesiastical definition of "church" by which is meant an assembly, a convention, a formal gathering, a ceremonial relationship, or a congregation of men who have a common creed. All these varieties of meaning have their importance, but they do not touch the essential meaning of the term as here used. The Church of Christ is redeemed by the blood of Christ; it has, therefore, entered into the mystery of the priesthood of Christ, and all its members are united by a great act of sacrifice. The Church is more than an assembly; it is a fellowship of spirit, a kinship of heart, an expression of brotherhood. Men can only be brought

into Christ's Church by one way, and that is by way of the Cross. Nothing can be farther from the apostolic idea than that the Church is a semi-political association, a branch of the State, a government within a government, a creature of human environment. He whose soul is right is in the true Church. Churchmanship is not a matter of formal creed, but of conscious living union with the fountain of life, even the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom all fulness dwells. There may be endless distinctions and differences of creed, but there is only one true and indestructible faith. Jesus is the firstborn of every creature; Jesus is the firstborn from the dead; Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection; Jesus is the first and the last; Jesus has in all things the pre-eminence. To apply such language to any mere man is surely the profanest blasphemy.

The same would apply to the marvellous words in verse 20. Jesus Christ "made peace through the blood of His Cross." Of what man could this be said? His blood was

shed that He might "reconcile all things unto Himself." Of what mere man could this be said? Nor were the things referred to small, local, and manageable by human hands. They were "things in earth, or things in heaven." The mere asking of the question is its own best answer. It is impossible for Jesus Christ to be merely a man, and yet to exercise all the prerogatives of God, and to receive all the adoration due only to the Most High. Paul is our best Christian teacher, and certainly there can be no doubt that it never entered into Paul's mind that his Master was only a man. We are bound to construe words historically and grammatically, and so construed Paul stands forth as a rapturous and devoted believer in the deity of Jesus Christ.

> Verses 21, 22: "And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in His sight."

Here was a concrete instance of the reconciliation which Jesus Christ effected by

the blood of His Cross. The Apostle is not content with a general recognition of the reconciling power of the Cross—he points directly and personally to the Colossians themselves, "You . . . hath He reconciled." The power of Christian doctrine is in Christian experience. Reconciled men are illustrations of the doctrine of reconciliation. Go into the sanctuary of your own minds if you would understand somewhat of the peace-bringing power of the Cross of Christ. The doctrines of the Saviour are to be incarnated, as He Himself was. As He was the fulness of the Godhead bodily, so His followers are to be filled, according to their capacity, with all the fulness of His grace. The Apostle recognises two distinct periods in the history of the human spirit: (1) "You that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works"; (2) "Reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in His sight." What nobler challenge could be addressed to any competitive religion than that it should produce as its proofs loftiness and

beauty of character? The three words chosen by Paul are "holy," "unblameable," and "unreproveable." These are the ideals; these are the standards. These words are not to be interpreted by the dictionary—the standard of their interpretation is set forth by the Apostle himself in the striking words, "in His sight." We are not to be clothed in rags of our own manufacture. We are not to be judged by outward, mechanical, or formal appearances; we are, in reality, what we are in the sight of Christ. He will know our virtues and our vices; He will test the sincerity of our motives, and He will judge with all pity and mercy the circumstances under which we laboured. As Christ was a great Saviour, so He is a great Judge. We are safe in His hands. The Apostle continues, with his usual caution, to insist upon a vital condition—"If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister." Any breach of the

conditions would jeopardise all the promises, and would render all the natural issues impossible. We must "continue in the faith." "Continue" is another word for "grow." It is not simply stopping in one place as a stone might remain upon a given spot; it is continuing as a tree continues, always in the same place, yet always becoming stronger and more fruitful. If the figure be changed to that of a foundation, as is suggested by the word "grounded," the sense of the first figure is in no degree impaired, because the foundation is living, and they are living stones that are built upon it. We are to find our continuity in our life; as Christ's life always continues, so our life must be continued in Him. If we sever ourselves from Him, our reconciliation ceases to be a fact, and our former experience is degraded into a dead letter.

The Apostle winds up this part of his letter (to the end of chapter i.) by distinct personal allusions asserting his personal ministry, yet tracing that ministry not to his own will, but to the dispensation of God, and enriching

that ministry with all the grace and glory of a divine bestowal. The Apostle never refers to his ministry as in any danger of being impoverished. He speaks of "the riches of the glory of this mystery." The Apostle finds his treasure in heaven. He is not drawing from a cistern; he is relying upon the fountains of eternity. He is in no fear of his ministry running out, because it is not his ministry in any sense that is self-originated on his part. He will speak God's word down to his latest breath, and the last word he speaks will be as energetic, as tuneful, and as tender as the word he spoke in the fulness of his strength. The Apostle uses energetic words in describing the range of his ministry—"I labour," "I strive," God "worketh in me mightily." The ministry of the Apostle had a divine object in view; he wished to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus, and this perfectness is only to be attained through warning, and teaching, and striving. Preaching was not a mere contemplation; it was a sacrifice—as it were, a great offering of blood, the outpouring of the red wine of his heart upon the altar.

Ministers are not gentlemen at leisure. They do not do twenty other things and preach. They are concerned in the cure of souls, and will only do other things as they bear upon that sacred and immortal issue. The Apostle Paul took no pleasures, no recreations. He had no off-days; he knew nothing about our modern holiday. He preached, he warned, he taught, he strove. What wonder that in the final mists which fell upon his closing eyes he saw a gleaming of the crown of life!

CHAPTER II

Verse 1: "For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh."

THE first verse may be regarded as little more than local, except in the degree in which it indicates the passionate nature of the Apostle. In the last verse of the first chapter he is labouring and striving according to an influence which is working mightily in him. This influence he speaks of in general terms in the first instance, and then he localises it in the great conflicts which he experienced on behalf of the saints at Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Paul was not only the Apostle; he was, so to say, the soldier of the churches, always fighting and suffering on behalf of those whom he would make perfect in Christ Jesus. He even includes "as many as have not seen my face in the

flesh"—all Christian souls, all strugglers after light and liberty. As characteristic of Paul it is noticeable that his work takes the form of strife and conflict. He does not turn his theology into a dream. His doctrine is no mere poem. It is a force, an inspiration, a sacred and unquenchable passion.

> Verses 2, 3: "That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

Here is the Apostle's character depicted in the Apostle's desire or prayer. Here is the expression of supreme spiritual anxiety. This is no desire for social position such as the Church itself has often striven after. There is no wish here for increase in land, and gold, and power. This is not the utterance of selfish lustfulness. The heart is filled with a solemn and overpowering desire for the best welfare of those who have given themselves to Christ. The Apostle prayed that their hearts might be comforted—that is, strengthened, encouraged, stimulated; he

also prayed that they might be knit together in love, and that they might revel in the infinite riches of the mystery of grace. He desired that the saints might be men of wealth, but the wealth must be immaterial, spiritual, divine. The Apostle will have nothing that is merely sentimental; he prayed for a "full assurance of understanding." He would have renewed souls enjoy access to "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." These treasures are hid in God and in Christ, and only the "initiated" can enter into the treasure-house and bring away honest and useful spoil.

> Verses 4, 5: "And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words. For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ."

The "conflict" in which Paul was engaged was the more strenuous that he was well aware that other workers were seeking to render his own service of none effect. He declares that the reason why he was so anxious for the spiritual culture of the saints was that they were exposed to the seductions

of false philosophy and skilfully applied flattery. He uses the word "beguile," which indicates a process of reasoning men into wrong notions respecting the divine life. He also speaks of "enticing words"—persuasions, allurements, false science, and all that was meant by what was then known as the Gnostic speculation. All young Christians are exposed to such flattering assaults; hence the need of age and experience and authority in the Christian Church. It is possible to be absent in the flesh and yet to be present in the spirit. The Colossians are advised that in the best sense of the term the Apostle is present amongst them. There is a sympathetic presence, there is a spiritual personality. When we go wrong in doctrine or in thought we offend a thousand spiritual influences whose presence we do not recognise. He who is a wilful heretic, or a disobedient disciple, offends with the heaviest insult all the preceded generations of faith and obedience. With infinite tact the Apostle assures the churches that he is seeing the very best side of their character. He does not come

to them with blame or rebuke; he beholds their order and the steadfastness of their faith in Christ. The Apostle never fails in courtesy. He may open the way for self-rebuke on the part of those who are made conscious that they are praised beyond their deserts; but herein the Apostle is only making room for the operation of conscience. The Apostle could strike with a heavy hand when necessity required, but no man could make more generous use of encouragements when souls needed to be cheered through some night of gloom.

> Verses 6–8: "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him: rooted and built up in Him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."

Temptations are of various kinds—a fact which we do not sufficiently recognise. It is supposed that men are only grossly tempted—tempted to crime, to outrage, to open acts of disobedience. These are the

coarsest temptations of the devil. The Apostle now deals with intellectual and spiritual temptations—temptations to doubt, to invent, to philosophise, to offer incense to intellectual vanity. What is the Apostle's protection under such assaults cunningly addressed to the soul? Observe how profoundly practical and far-reaching is his counsel! He would have the Colossians rooted and built up in Christ; he would have them firmly established and grounded in the faith. He desires that they may abound in faith with thanksgiving. Paul would have no man double-minded in his religious thought and inquiry. He does not seek for uniformity in merely intellectual opinion; he desires that souls may be rooted and built up in Christ. Philosophies change, Christ abides. Leaves come and go, but the root remains. This is the very pith of Christianity, for the soul to be right in its relations to Christ. Hold on to the truth of which you have been assured, and do not meddle with every process of evolution. Faith may often come through doubt, but it is no business of the soul to create doubts,

to multiply and encourage them, in order that it may secure some ultimate blessing. The Apostle acknowledges that the temptations to which the intellect is exposed are subtle and flattering, but he would have them treated radically and finally by an ever-deepening communion with the Spirit of Christ.

From this point to the end of the fifteenth verse the Apostle continues his exhortation, leading the minds of those to whom he wrote into the deepest mysteries of the faith. He addresses them as those who have been brought out of bondage into great liberty—a liberty which itself was an enlarged bondage in the degree in which it made the soul of the believer more and more a willing and grateful slave of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle would seem to say, "Never forget your obligations to the redeeming and forgiving Christ; never forget that Christ blotted out what before stood against us; never forget that Jesus Christ took up our past life, with all its sins and miseries, and nailed it to His cross; never

forget that Jesus Christ spoiled the principalities and powers that once oppressed us, that He shook the enemy as by an almighty hand, and that He openly triumphed over all the enemies of the soul." It was under such convictions and persuasions that the Colossians were to continue their course of faith and progress. There is no better policy now. Blessed be God, we have not to invent a Gospel, but to believe one; to no painted Christ or sculptured Cross has the soul to go, but straight away to the living, personal, loving Redeemer.

Verse 9: "For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily."

This is the most explicit declaration of the deity of Jesus Christ in the whole Scripture. Every word may be said to have an emphasis peculiar to itself. Jesus Christ is not only the subject of special divine inspiration—He is the incarnate God. In Him are the infinite resources of divine wealth; in Him the Godhead has taken up its earthly and visible habitation. God said that He would dwell with His people, and here it is expressly

declared that the fulness of the Godhead dwells with Christ, or more intensely still dwells in Him as part of His very nature, part of His essential and indestructible substance. The Apostle has already used an expression practically equivalent: "God was pleased that in Him all fulness should dwell." This is the only instance in which the entire fulness of God is embodied. The great message to the heart is that we find all we need in the Son of God. His are the unsearchable riches. Of his fulness have we received grace upon grace like billow upon billow, or summer upon summer of satisfaction, and glory, and bounty. If we are straitened, we are not straitened in Christ, but in ourselves. Let us then in faith eat the body of Christ and drink His blood, and assure ourselves that in Him we have inexhaustible grace. Do not attempt to add anything to Christ. Never seek to construct a supplement to the provisions of the Cross. Christ is full of grace and truth. The glory that shone in Him was as the light of the Only-begotten of the Father. God did not ask for any more room than He

had provided for Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

Verse 10: "And ye are complete in Him, which is the head of all principality and power."

This necessarily follows, from the very nature of Christ, if so be we have received Christ into our hearts. The literal meaning is that we ourselves have been filled up in the fulness of Christ. All the divine influence which we realise and enjoy we receive directly in Christ and through Christ. Never forget the medium of divine communication; and always remember in thanking God, or in coming before God in the confidence and expectancy of prayer, that we must approach the throne through the Cross. "Of His fulness have we all received, and grace for grace." We are "made the righteousness of God in Him." For He is "made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." We are not to complete ourselves; from foundation to roof we are to be the special building of God. How vividly is the position of Jesus Christ described in the second part of this tenth verse!

—"the head of all principality and power." We do not receive our supplies from secondary sources, but from the central and eternal fountain. Our Lord is not described in terms of humiliation. Hear the noble words upon which this assurance is founded: "God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name." Peter speaks thus of his Lord and ours: "Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him." And this is our Lord! This is the Fountain that cannot fail! This is the guarantee of our ultimate maturity and perfectness!

> Verse 11: "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ."

This is an apparently abrupt and irrelevant reference, but it is made natural and explicable when it is remembered that the Apostle is writing to people who were tempted to return to some of the old Jewish observances. Paul believed in circumcision, but it was

circumcision made without hands—a spiritual cutting and sacrifice without which we cannot enter into the separated and anointed family of God. The old term is used with a new meaning. Now, "he is a Jew which is one inwardly." Christianity has done away with mere formalism, or ritualism, because it has established itself in the heart as the supreme moral force. "Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God." From the beginning this had been the purpose of circumcision, if men had but known it, for even in Deuteronomy we read: "The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God." And again we read, both in Jeremiah and in Deuteronomy, such words as, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart." Thus, spiritual religion is the originally intended issue of divinely appointed formalities. Now the knife is done away with; now bodily brand and scar must be known no more—"For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no

confidence in the flesh." A most expressive figure is that of "putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ." There is a good deal of "putting off" to be done in the development of the Christian life. The expression "put off" is quite common with the Apostle Paul: "Put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts" (Eph. iv. 22). "Ye also put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds" (Col. iii. 8, 9)

> Verses 12–15: "Buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it."

Baptism is here regarded typically and as

pointing to something richer than itself. We are to be buried with Christ after our crucifixion with Him. Baptism by water is more spiritual than the cutting of the body by knives, and baptism of the Holy Ghost is more spiritual than baptism by water. All the economies and dispensations have pointed towards spiritual completion. Baptism cannot end in water; circumcision cannot end in surgery; cleansing cannot be effected by soap and water and nitre. From the beginning God's purpose was spiritual, and unless we have come into a spiritual appropriation of the Cross, it is to us so much wood, and so much iron, without spiritual significance and force. Our resurrection with Christ is "the operation of God." The power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead must also raise us not only from our death in trespasses and sins, but also our death as fellow-sufferers with Christ. In a special sense Christ and his believers, or followers, may be said to be buried in the same tomb, and out of that tomb all are raised by the power of God—Christ the firstfruits and afterwards those who have been partakers of His sufferings.

The Apostle always refers to sin as a destroyed power, to death as a vanquished foe, to our former corruption as an offence that has been taken away by the power of Christ. We are not to dwell upon our sins as if they were unforgiven. If God has forgiven us for Christ's sake, it is no business of ours to be raking up the unholy past. The handwriting of ordinances that was against us has been blotted out. "Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in Himself of twain one new man, so making peace" (Eph. ii. 15). We ought to realise in the most vivid and emphatic manner that we are forgiven souls, and from the day of our forgiveness we should date the certainty of our sonship and blessedness. It is a reflection upon God to be continually recalling the evil past. God himself does not upbraid us with our sins, wherein we have brokenheartedly confessed them and brought them to the Cross that there they might be slain. Let not our hearts be troubled: we believe in God—let us have still more living and triumphant faith in Christ. Through death

Christ has destroyed "him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. ii. 14).

> Verses 16–18: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind."

A great amount of trouble is made possible by pedantic obedience to things which are in themselves at once transient and unprofitable. The Colossian Christians were troubled by teachers who had a most imperfect knowledge of the purpose of the great Redemption. They were slaves of the letter. They could not see that religion might be intensely spiritual, having risen far above all ceremony, and ritual, and elementary appointments of every kind. The Apostle bids the Colossians take heart in remembrance of the fact that they were living members of the living body of Christ. "Why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live,

saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling-block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Rom. xiv. 10–13). The Gospel has this great message which it would deliver to the inmost heart of its humblest believer: "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." Much of our religious trouble would be dried up if we attended to the main things and regulated our lives by the central and essential principles of the kingdom of Christ. The Apostle Paul gave great liberty to men, according to the degree of their faith and according to their spiritual capacity: "One believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him" (Rom. xiv. 2, 3). There have always been clever people in the Church whose object has been to spoil the simplicity

of faith. They have had fancies of their own respecting holydays, and new moons, and Sabbath days. They have had in their souls the very genius or demon of deception. They would not allow the simplicity of Christ to stand in its own majesty. The Apostle cautions Christian worshippers against all such foolishly inventive persons: "This I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words" (Col. ii. 4). The ritualism of faith has been its paralysis, if not its absolute destruction. Whatever these local references may mean, we have corresponding temptations in our own time by which souls are greatly troubled. One man has a garment, another a vessel, another a symbol, another a ritual, another a prejudice—and so on almost endlessly, not knowing that the age of shadows has passed and the day of the abiding reality has dawned. In the next verse the Apostle goes to the root of the matter.

> Verse 19: "And not holding the head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God."

This is the great defect of the teaching

upon which he has been commenting. All the inventions were clever enough, but they were rendered improper and nugatory by the fact that the inventors themselves did not hold the living Head. If we are wrong in the matter of the Headship of Christ, no marvel that we should try to make up the error or the deficiency by inventions and fantasies of our own. The Church can never be right until it is right in relation to the Headship of Christ. Who is Lord of the Church? Who redeemed it? Who has a right to control it? These are the penetrating and all-determining questions. A beautiful figure is that which makes the Church part of the very body of Christ. "Grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. iv. 15, 16).

As the branch is to the vine, so are we to Christ. The limb that is severed from

the body must decay and putrefy. This is the basis of all that follows.

> Verses 20–23: "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh."

The local references are of small consequence to the men of to-day. Probably we shall never fully know the meaning of the worshipping of angels, and the perverted grace known as "voluntary humility." Still we ourselves may have tendencies towards literalism and narrowness of interpretation which ought to be checked. We are tempted by the spectacular. It is in our very nature to wish to be doing something to show how energetic we are in Christian activity. It is so difficult for the soul to be truly humble and to live upon the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We turn the Gospel into a conundrum that we may enjoy the intellectual luxury of endeavouring to answer our own questions.

We are in danger of appointing men to invent commandments and doctrines for us. The heart loves a painted cross, or a crucifix fashioned in ivory, or a dramatic repetition of all that is meant by "Calvary." My soul, enter thou not into the folly of these men who are building card houses of their own when they might dwell in the sanctuary not made with hands! As to inventions, physical representations, carnal parodies—touch not, taste not, handle not. All such things perish with the using. The great redemption has been completed: enter thou into the house where thou canst find the blood which alone cleanseth from all sin. As for the fancies and the dreams of men, touch them not, or use them without coming under their bondage. Answer not the enemy in words of thine own invention; set thou not up between thyself and the foe some mechanical inventions of designing men, but fight the devil with the Cross, and assuredly he shall be trodden under foot.

CHAPTER III

Verses 1–4: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory."

FOUR times is the name of Christ repeated. The Apostle now becomes intensely spiritual, expressing his deep solicitude for the culture and strengthening of the Christian heart. It must not be overlooked that there is a sequence in the exhortation of the first verse. The two great commandments of the law are love of God and love of neighbour; so in this experience the resurrection with Christ precedes and necessitates the growth of the life in heavenly directions. The man who has not known the power of the resurrection of Christ cannot possibly seek those things which are above. The eagle cannot

fly until its wings be grown; no more can the soul seek the heavens until it has known what it is to share the resurrection of Christ. There is a self-disappointing aspiration. It gets no higher than the roof of the house. It cannot fly away into the sanctuary and the bosom of God. The reason of such disappointment is that the aspiration is only a phase of rationalism, a slavish obedience to certain literal formalities; it is not inspired by the enthusiasm of faith. A merely mechanical power knows nothing of the force of gravitation. No more does the piety of mere reason know the mystery of fellowship with God, and communion with the Holy Ghost.

It is worse than useless to tell men to set their affection on things above, not on things on the earth, when they have not been away with Christ in the solitude of the tomb, and when they have not come up from that solitude clothed with the power of Christ's resurrection. Exhortation without inspiration cannot do more than disturb and vex the soul. Do not go to the seed as it lies in the seeds-

man's box and exhort it to bring forth leaf and flower and fruit. Until it is planted in the earth, and brought into nutritive relation to the appointed ministries of nature, it must remain without development and increase. It is precisely so with the soul of man. Man must be buried with Christ, man must share the very tomb of Christ in its highest symbolism, and man must be consciously one with Christ in the very suffering of the Cross, or he can never set his affection on things above.

The text is a kind of challenge. In effect the Apostle says, "Prove your resurrection by your unworldliness, your aspiration after God, your discontent with all things earthly, and your passionate desire to realise a heavenly citizenship. Where Christ is we must be. When Christ is dead we are dead; when Christ rises we rise; when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." Christ is the living force. Christ determines everything. We originate nothing, we determine nothing; we are dead and our life is hid with Christ in

God. Our life is away yonder in the high heavens, finding its centre, its sustenance, its immortality in the eternal life of Christ.

> Verses 5–7: "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry. For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: in the which ye also walked sometime, when ye lived in them."

Then it is not all contemplation, and sentiment, and poetry! This life in Christ means discipline. We have died with Christ that we might obtain the power of Christ, and we are to use that power in destroying the works of the flesh and the influence of the devil. By the power of Christ's resurrection we have been brought to the use of strenuous, penetrating, continual discipline. Discipline has to do for the body what resurrection with Christ has done for the soul. We are raised again with Christ that we may begin, continue, and complete a great fight or sacrifice. We are to practise a large spiritual surgery. It is in vain that we profess to have risen

with Christ if the body is to have its own way. Because we have risen with Christ is sin to be permitted to abound? God forbid. We are called upon to make ourselves examples and living illustrations of what is meant by an inward and spiritual grace. If a man say that he has risen with Christ, and is still allowing the lower nature to have its own way, that man is lying to the Holy Ghost. Our spiritual experience does not end our bodily discipline; on the contrary, it but begins that exacting and sin-subduing process. The Christian method is not to proceed from the body to the soul, but from the soul to the body. Reason might have said, "Conquer your lower nature, and then proceed to bring your spiritual nature into subjection." That is the common way of man. He thinks it is logical and cumulative. Christ pronounces it to be illogical and impossible. Christ would make the tree good that He might make the fruit good. Christ does not work from the fruit to the root; he works from the root to the fruit. Thus the Christian lives a kind of double experience. At the

very moment that he rejoices in his resurrection with Christ, he is, in the power of that resurrection, maiming and slaying all that is evil in his body.

A very fine distinction is drawn in the seventh verse—the distinction between "walk" and "living." The Apostle reminds the Colossians that they walked in the things in which they lived. Now he would destroy the "living" that he might also put an end to the "walking." It is possible, as experience may be called upon to testify, to walk in certain habits, or to yield to certain propensities, without willingly and consentingly "living" in them. Man does not get rid of his evil nature at once. Many a man may be tempted, and may even be overcome in spite of the remonstrance and rebuke of conscience. Man is no stronger than his weakest point; so it always happens that the weakness of the body hinders or confuses, or postpones, the progress of the soul. A man may do evil without the consent of his own will. The Apostle Paul has illustrated this conflicting

and tormenting experience in the seventh chapter of his Epistle to the Romans.

> Verses 8-10: "But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him."

Now comes the great change. All these evil things, like so many garments, are torn off the soul and thrown away in anger and disgust. Never forget that we have all come out of a state of heathenism. We have received the devil's baptism. We have been dragged after Satan, captives of his will. Here, then, is the true point or standard of judgment. In estimating our progress we must never forget the point we started from. In estimating the volume and quality of our life we must call to mind the fact that we were once dead in trespasses and sins. In an absolute sense a man may be steeped in wickedness even while professing to have received the Christian faith; but in a relative sense his very poor and

halting morality may mark a great step in advance. Character must be judged as a kind of self-comparison. What was I to begin with? What was my condition ten years ago? If evil is still clinging to me, is it clinging with my will or against it? Do I welcome the devil or resist him?

The great comfort is in the tenth verse, in which the Christian character is represented not in a state of negation, but in a positive relation to Jesus Christ. There is not only a putting off—there is a putting on. "Ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man"—literally, the young man, the youthful man, the man who is full of energy, aspiration, and sacred passion. Christianity identifies itself with youth, and renewal, and with vernal promises of a glorious summer beauty and fruitfulness. Having referred to the great liberty which the soul acquires in Christ Jesus—having abolished Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond and free, and having declared the infinitely sublime doctrine that

Christ is all, and in all—the Apostle proceeds thus in his practical exhortation:

> Verses 12, 13: "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."

Thus is the reality of the Christian life to be proved, and thus are men to be approached with really effective appeals on the matter of discipline and growth. How tender the Apostle is! He describes the Christians to whom he writes as "the elect of God, holy and beloved." This defines somewhat of the range and function of divine election. One would suppose that if people were "elect of God" they would be above pastoral exhortation; certainly one would suppose that if men were "holy and beloved" they needed no further grace and no further virtue. We are forbidden to gild refined gold, or to paint the lily—the poet will not allow such works of supererogation; yet here the Apostle Paul, the wisest of the poets and the strongest of the logicians,

describes men as "elect, holy and beloved," and then urges them towards mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, and towards forbearance and charity. We are thrown back upon the doctrine that sometimes the Christian is to be taken in the ideality rather than in the prose and commonplace of his experience. We might reverse the appeal, and say, put on bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, and thus become "the elect of God, holy and beloved." The Apostle pursues a directly opposite course; he appeals to the ideal man that he may assist the real man. He gives men a new motive, a new impulse, by calling up their best self-hood, their spiritual personality as God Himself views it. Sometimes God gives strength, and sometimes He calls upon men to put on their strength. The action is double and co-operative; so sometimes God tells man how beloved he is in heaven in order that he may become better upon the earth. Eternity must help time, and time must dignify itself by remembering the eternity out of which it came.

Here is the sublimest appeal that can be addressed to human intelligence and affection, "Even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye." We are inspired and strengthened in the degree in which we go to Christ not only for doctrine, but for example. Life without forgiveness would be a constantly increasing cloud and fear. Forgiveness renews life, calls back vanished youthfulness, throws open the radiant gates of new opportunities. Men may know that they are growing in grace in the degree in which they are prepared to exercise the grace and duty of forgiveness. "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Not how I would forgive, but how Christ would forgive, must be the rule and standard of conduct. The frailty of human nature is recognised in the thirteenth verse. Mutual forbearance is everywhere required. Occasions of offence will arise in the development of the manifold life which men are called upon to live: these occasions do not violate the fundamental charter of election upon which our spiritual manhood is held. Occasions of offence are so many opportunities

of grace. Let no man wantonly regard his election as a licence to sin. The Apostle is very explicit upon this point in his letter to the Ephesians: "He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love" (Eph. i. 4). Election does not entitle us to exercise severity towards those who offend us. In the degree in which we are conscious of pride we may suspect the validity of our election. "Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted"—not only kind in an ordinary way, but kind even to tender-heartedness. The inspired writers do not shrink from the use of these compound words, and indeed their use is most encouraging and profitable. For example, God's kindness is "loving-kindness," and God's mercy is "tender-mercy," and true piety is "tender-heartedness." Love requires these hyperbolic forms of expression in order to indicate its range and intensity.

Verse 14: "And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness."

The expression "above all" is more literally "over all"—above all as an upper

garment covers an under garment. Love is to unite the whole character; it is the golden cincture which grasps all the jewels of our best life. There were teachers who held that wisdom was supreme; they maintained that knowledge was the greatest glory of the human mind. The Scriptures tell us that knowledge shall vanish away, but that love shall abide in imperishable survival all the wreck. Do not glory in your knowledge, in your genius, or in your wealth, or in any circumstances external and perishable; but rejoice in love, in sympathy with the heart of Christ, in oneness with the character of God. Love is the bond of perfectness, love thinketh no evil. "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." If we think we can enter into fellowship with God through knowledge, as a triumph of intellectual genius and power, we deceive ourselves. "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love."

Verse 15: "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body: and be ye thankful."

The peace of God in this passage means the peace of Christ. We are to be at peace in Christ and with Christ, being reconciled in Him as we have been reconciled by Him. This peace shall be the referee by whose word every battle shall be decided. The peace of Christ is to arbitrate in all the collisions and conflicts of life. We are not to do anything that would flutter the holy heart. If we encourage any temper or pursue any course that would disturb the peace of Christ, we may know by that sign that our temper is wrong and that our ambition draws us in wrong directions.

> Verse 16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

The word of Christ corresponds with the peace of Christ. We often hear of the word of the Lord and of the word of God, but in this case we hear of the word of Christ as if it were of equal scope and authority. "If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." The word of Christ is to dwell

in us in all wisdom; there is a place for intelligence in the development of the soul: we are to love the Lord our God not only with all our heart, but with all our mind. We find the word of Christ in the Holy Scriptures, not only in the four Gospels, but in Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms. We teach what we know; we sing what we hope. Christianity is a religion of music. We are to speak to ourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our heart to the Lord (Eph. v. 19). Emotion must find expression. Religious emotion is likely to find expression in psalm and song, and every form and manner of musical utterance. It is all but impossible to be at once faithful and dumb. It is impossible to enjoy the peace of Christ without raising a hymn or anthem in celebration of His presence. But emotion is not to perish like an exhalation—it has a disciplinary aspect, as we see in the words immediately following.

Verse 17: "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him."

Once more the Gospel is brought into educational contact with the daily life. Word and deed are alike to be sanctified. When we stand up or sit down we are to do so in the name of the Lord Jesus. When we garner our harvest we are to sing a loud doxology. When the child is born or the aged pilgrim is called home we are to sing a song of thankfulness. The religion of Jesus Christ is not a partial standard, or counsellor, or helper. Note the "whatsoever." Note "word or deed." All life is to be religious. Every breath is to be a prayer. Every look to the high hills is to express a desire to be more and more in fellowship with Him whose sanctuary is founded upon them.

> Verses 18–22: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged. Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God."

It would be a mistake to suppose that all these exhortations and counsels are so much

small talk on the part of the Apostle. He is not appearing in a grandfatherly capacity. When the passage is properly read it will be discovered that he is just as dignified here as in any other part of his Epistle. This would be a poor ending to so high a mood and so divine a contemplation. Going back upon the spring and reason of these exhortations, we shall find that they are suggested and controlled by the love of Christ. That is the underlying ground of all the Apostle's argument and persuasion, here and elsewhere, throughout his addresses and letters.

The wife is not to submit herself to her husband simply as a matter of legal compulsion or even of natural sequence; her submission is to be "as it is fit in the Lord." If the wife loves the Saviour, loves Him who "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross," she will have no delight in the assertion and domination of her own will. Obedience to Christ makes all lawful submission, and all natural dependence, easy and even delightful.

Husbands cannot love their wives as a mere

matter of law, as who should say, "I dislike to do this—it goes quite against the grain for me to do it; but for law's sake, and for decency's sake, I must at least appear to do it and so escape from social criticism and rebuke,"—here, again, it is the love of Christ that constrains, ennobles, and sanctifies. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to Himself a glorious church. . . . Let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself" (Eph. v. 25–27, 33).

Children are to be brought up to accept the discipline of obedience. To obey well is ultimately to rule well. Here, again, a great religious reason is urged upon the minds of children. There is a natural obedience, there is a conventional obedience, there is a concession of obedience—but all these forms of obedience must give place to the contention of the Apostle: "for this is well-pleasing unto the Lord." The Lord is the

Father of us all. If we do not obey religiously, we cannot, with any enduring effect, obey socially. On another occasion the same Apostle gave the same reason in other words: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right" (Eph. vi. 1). In the earlier dispensations children were urged to obedience on the ground "that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." In the Christian dispensation the reason rises to an infinitely higher level, intensely expressed in the words "for this is right."

As there is a duty for children, so there is a duty for parents. Parents are not to exasperate and anger their children. Parental relationship gives no right to vex and harass, and arbitrarily humble the children of the house. A special reason is brought to bear upon parents, a reason as tender in its sentiment as it is philosophical in its conception—"lest they be discouraged." Children are easily disheartened. Some flowers can only live in the sunshine. Parents should remember that children have weaknesses of

their own, and parents should specially remember that some of the weaknesses of the child may be due to the parents themselves. Some plants soon wither under the blight of the east wind. The man who has given his child a weak constitution should be very pitiful and gentle in his treatment of that constitution and all that flows from it. Parental tyranny is one of the worst fruits of the devil. Children remember the cruelties by which their early days were darkened, and it may be that such memory will haunt them and discourage them throughout all the days of their lives.

The relation of master and servant can never be finally determined and controlled except on the principles which Jesus Christ embodied and expounded. Society can never be regenerated by programme, or by external policy of any kind; it can only be regenerated by the grace of God. Service must not be looked upon as degradation. The difficulty and the curse of to-day in this matter is that work is considered a degradation. To the end of the world we must have high and low,

master and servant, leader and follower—for this is the law of history and of Providence. "To one man is given five talents, to another two, to another one." In this reference to master and slave is there any delicate recognition of the former character and the former disobedience of Onesimus, who is supposed to have carried this letter to Colosse? Delicately the Apostle represents the once runaway Onesimus as a converted man, and he beseeches Philemon to receive Onesimus "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?" (Philem. 16.) Onesimus, though a Christian, was also a servant or slave. Servitude accepted as an unavoidable degradation is one thing, but service accepted in the spirit of Christ and for the sake of Christ is ennobled and sanctified.

> Verses 23–25: "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons."

Still the Apostle grounds this argument on

purely Christian considerations. All service is to be rendered as unto the Lord; "ye serve the Lord Christ." "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord." Even the slave who obeys in the spirit of Christ shall not be denied the enjoyment of an appropriate harvest. "Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free" (Eph. vi. 8). We are to stand towards Christ in the relation of slaves and also in the relation of God's freemen.

"If any man serve Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve Me, him will My Father honour" (John xii. 26). Do not concern yourselves beyond what is meet, and beyond what is necessary to the security of society, about wrongdoers and breakers of the law. Whoever does wrong shall reap a natural harvest without respect of persons: God "judgeth according to every man's work" (1 Peter i. 17). Temporary laws, social arrangements, fixed penalties, have all been rendered necessary by civilization. Beyond

the statute book of man is the judgment book of God. God's law includes all other law that is just and righteous, and goes beyond all other law in that it can penetrate to the inmost nature and work out spiritual penalties. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. v. 10).

CHAPTER IV

Verse 1: "Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven."

IT is no new sentiment with the Apostle Paul that masters should treat their servants in a spirit of equity. Here, as before, a profoundly religious reason is given —"knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven." It is quite true that masters and slaves have been known from the earliest Bible ages, but it is not always sufficiently remembered that the law of equity is as old as the custom of servitude. "Thou shalt not rule over him with rigour; but shalt fear thy God" (Lev. xxv. 43). "Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee" (Deut. xv. 15). The same consideration of equity inspired the question which is so clearly written in the

Book of Job, "Did not He that made me in the womb make him? and did not one fashion us in the womb?" (Job xxxi. 15.) Surely the Apostle has something special in his mind in this exhortation. Is he about to plead for some special grace? Is it his ardent desire to melt some obstinate heart? Has he any one special in his mind? Is he thinking of Philemon and Onesimus?

> Verses 2–4: "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving; withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds: that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak."

Again the Apostle becomes intensely religious. Men who continue in prayer and in thanksgiving are not likely to be severe to their fellow-creatures. When the spirit loses the disposition of prayer it is not unlikely to be hard, resentful, and exacting. The Apostle never approved intermittent prayer. "Pray without ceasing." "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (Eph. vi. 18).

He who is an intercessor is likely to be clement and gracious towards his fellowmen. "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint." This is the true culture of the soul. Prayer is not incessant asking, but incessant communion with God. "Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray" (Ps. lv. 17). This is only the Psalmist's way of saying that the whole day is consecrated to the enjoyment and privilege of divine fellowship.

We are not to live only in the general atmosphere of prayer; we are to come into particulars, and to plead for special personalities and urgent necessities. Even the greatest of the Apostles desired that he might live in the prayerful sympathy of the humblest Christians. He regarded God as the keeper of his lips and the sentinel of his mouth, and he prayed his brethren to supplicate God on his behalf for the gift of utterance, that he might speak not some poor conception of his own, but the very "mystery of Christ." Paul desired to preach the doctrine for which he suffered. Because

he was in prison for the doctrine, he would earnestly desire to make that publicly known on every hand. "Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me" (Rom. xv. 30). The Apostle believed in common prayer. He believed that the many might effectively pray for the one. Here he comes before the Colossian church in an attitude of dependence and humility. On no account will he have it that he is the author of his own doctrine. "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. iv. 1). The gift of interpreting mysteries is one of the special gifts of God. "It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. xiii. 11). Paul would be taught, so to say, in the very art of speech, that he might deliver his message in the most persuasive and commanding manner. His ordination as a speaker of the divine mysteries he wished to make manifest to all men. "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom,

but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. ii. 4). We should receive more from our ministers if we cherished them more warmly in our thoughts when we are having the fullest access to the throne of grace. We should not pray that our ministers should be brilliant, or learned, or popular; but we should earnestly supplicate the Head of the Church that He would endow them with the gift of insight and of speech, that they might at once perceive and declare the mysteries of His own kingdom.

> Verses 5, 6: "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man."

It is Paul who here inculcates the grace and the responsibility of prudence!—the same Paul who was charged with madness, and with being beside himself, and with unregulated zeal. Now he warns the Colossians that there are people outside the Church as well as inside, and that a good deal depends upon the behaviour of those who are inside as to the estimate which will be

put upon them by outside and possibly hostile observers. "The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy" (James iii. 17). Make the best of the time—redeem it, buy up the opportunity—use all your resources in making known and extending the kingdom of God. Keep up a holy conversation amongst yourselves. The conversation which you thus sustain will have an effect beyond your own circle; for by often speaking one to another in the name of the Lord, and secretly studying the innermost mysteries of divine grace, you will come to know how you ought to answer every man. "The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom, and his tongue talketh judgment" (Ps. xxxvii. 30). "The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious" (Eccles. x. 12). What need we have of heart culture! How rich we should be in spiritual perception and sympathy! "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and

an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things" (Matt. xii. 34, 35).

The rest of the Epistle is full of personal reference and appreciation. "All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord." This was the character of Tychicus, and yet he was without fame of a popular kind; his reputation was in heaven rather than one of the noises of the world. What higher character can a man sustain than that he should be a faithful minister and a fellow-servant in the Lord, and a beloved brother? We cannot all be great, but by the grace of God we can all be good. We may not be brilliant, but we can all be faithful. We cannot all lead as masters and captains, but we can all be fellow-servants and brethren in love. Tychicus had also a great capacity for comforting the hearts of men. He loved the Apostle Paul, studied all his ways, was familiar with his chief purposes: therefore he could enlighten the Colossians upon all matters relating to the great Apostle, and thus he could bring courage into the hearts of those who longed to know how the

greatest of the Apostles was conducting the battle of the Gospel. Paul was great upon comfort, understanding by the word "comfort," strengthening, encouraging, stimulating: "Now our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work" (2 Thess. ii. 16, 17).

Onesimus is described as a faithful and beloved brother, and as a Colossian by birth or by adoption. Onesimus is "a faithful and beloved brother"—not a word is said about his being a runaway slave. Paul does not go back upon the past, but appreciates and magnifies the present. Did Onesimus write part of this Epistle at the dictation of Paul? Did he write the part about servants and the part about masters? When he took the Epistle and handed it to the Colossian church, had he not in his possession a private note intended for the personal perusal of one called Philemon? Writing to the Colossians, Paul describes Onesimus as "a faithful and beloved

brother"; but writing to Philemon, he describes him as "my son Onesimus." There is a meaning in all this tender sentiment, a meaning which Paul will earnestly apply when he addresses himself to Philemon.

Then Aristarchus, and Marcus, and Justus, and Epaphras, and Luke, and Demas, are all referred to as being deeply interested in the welfare of the Colossian church. Were these men brilliant preachers? We have no evidence that they were so. They are spoken of in their moral rather than in their intellectual capacity. They are fellow-prisoners, or fellow-workers, or fervent labourers, or beloved because of personal qualities. The Church is not wholly composed of leaders, captains, and generals; it is composed also of the great multitude, the common humanity, and Paul is never slow gratefully to recognise what quiet and obscure workers have done as they toiled for the kingdom of God. Epaphras was not an eloquent man, but he was fervent in prayer, his one desire being that his fellow-creatures should stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. Are we anxious to

secure this better fame? Do we blow trumpets at the street corners that we may proclaim our piety, or do we live our doctrine in all manner of active and comforting beneficence?

The name of Demas occurs here without brand or stain. Alas! there came a time when he was to be otherwise referred to. In his Second Epistle to Timothy, chap. iv. verses 10 and 11, we read: "Only Luke is with me. Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world." It is not enough to be good at one time of life. "He that endureth to the end shall be saved." "Ye did run well; who did hinder you?" Paul was accustomed to the discipline of desertion: "All they which are in Asia be turned away from me" (2 Tim. i. 15); "It is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire" (2 Peter ii. 22).

Verses 15–18: "Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. And when this epistle is read among you,

> cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it. The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you. Amen."

Paul forgets nobody. Names that have no significance to us were written on the tablet of his heart. He never could sufficiently recognise the service which his brethren rendered to him. To the Philippians he said, "I have you in my heart." Here he addresses a special exhortation to one called Archippus, who is described in the Epistle to Philemon as "Archippus our fellow-soldier." Of this man we know next to nothing, yet he fought side by side with the foremost warrior in the Church. Possibly Archippus, like many of ourselves, needed a frequent word of exhortation and encouragement. Paul was emphatically the man to speak such a word: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood" (Acts xx. 28).

Then the final word—the salutation by the hand of Paul, a hand often imprisoned, but a hand always free where service was to be rendered to truth and love. Even at this moment Paul was a prisoner, yet from within the prison he breathed out benediction upon those who loved the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not say, "Wealth be to you, prosperity, worldly honour," but, "Grace be with you. All the fruits of the Spirit be with you! All the blessings of heaven make you glad and strong!" Great hearts breathe great prayers.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

THY kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Bring in Thy kingdom, Father of lights, and bring it in with power, so that we may feel its passion, and respond to its music, and obey its laws. We have heard of Thy kingdom; Thy Son has put it into parables for us. We have listened to the gracious words that have proceeded out of His mouth, and we say, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Thine is a kingdom of light and love, of security, and tenderness, and rest. Oh that Thy kingdom would come! Even so, Lord Jesus,

come quickly—not in our way, but in Thine own way; whether visibly or providentially, or by increase of grace and enthusiasm in the hearts of men, we shall know Thy coming. There is no coming like Thine, O Jesus, come quickly, for the earth awaits Thee and longs to know Thy power! Make Thyself visible to us in our hearts; may our hearts see Thee, and may we know the power of Christ, all-redeeming, all-atoning in the forgiveness, the conscious pardon of our sins. We bless Thee that Thou art a King and Thou hast a kingdom, and dost rule in righteousness, and Thy throne is founded upon justice and order and love. May we expect to know Thy law and endeavour humbly and resolutely to obey it. We bless Thee for the gathering time when man touches man, when we are conscious that we are in our Father's house. Let the light above the brightness of the sun make this evening service a time of peculiar glory. If we have any singular sorrow for which there is no speech that may be uttered in public, the Lord send comfort, a rent in the cloud which may mean the door of heaven.

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

ALONG with this Epistle to the Colossians there was a private or personal letter carried by the same letter-carrier, into the contents of which we may be permitted to look. Perhaps the style of the Apostle will change as he abandons for the moment what may be called the episcopal or official attitude, and begins to tell his thoughts in a more simple and friendly manner. Onesimus is the letter-carrier—no doubt a surprising messenger to the astounded Philemon. He knew the face well. He associated with that face memories of disobedience, theft, cowardice, and many other disagreeable reminiscences. It is by the hand of this man that Paul sends his great Epistle to the Colossian church! And yet not by this man at all, for "if any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature," and Onesimus

was now in Christ Jesus, and was no longer the thief and the runaway of other days. How will Paul introduce such a man to such a master? Philemon was probably the pastor, or bishop, of the church at Colosse. Though a pastor, he was a slaveholder, a circumstance which we must not judge by modern standards. Christianity took the world as it found it, and began as it could and where it could to introduce the sublime mystery of the New Manhood. Christianity is a Regeneration as well as a Redemption. The redemption comes first, and the regeneration follows as a completing ministry. Let us read the private letter to Philemon in our own English way. Then the Epistle will run somewhat after this fashion:

> My dearly beloved Philemon, though absent, yet present; though denied to the eyes of my body, yet ever vividly present to the vision of my soul,—I have a word to say to thee, and to the church that is in thy house, my faithful fellow-labourer. At the point of labour we meet as equals. We have

both laboured, and by labour we have come into fellowship and into the better understanding of one another, both as men and as workers in the Master's service. A sense of original brotherhood has been created in us because we have been moved by the same inspirations and upheld by the same hopes. I mean this letter to be specially perused by our beloved Apphia, thy sweet and loving wife, for I want to interest her sympathies in the delicate cause which I am about to plead. I am near and dear to thee, but Apphia is nearer and dearer still, and I am sure that her great womanly heart will instantly catch my meaning and cordially respond to my appeal. I want thy son Archippus also to be interested in this matter. He is a fellow-soldier and a minister of Christ, and I have exhorted him in my general Epistle to take heed to his ministry, and to do all in his power to carry out the will of the Holy Ghost therein. By-and-by I should like the church

which is in thy house to know the purport of this letter, and to support thee in carrying out my benevolent design. Grace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. If you realise this grace and this peace, there will be created in your souls an atmosphere favourable to the consideration of my appeal. Let me say at the very beginning that thy name is continually on my lips in expressions of thankfulness, "always in my prayers." I am constantly hearing of thy love and faith. I want them both to become larger day by day. I want thy faith and thy love to create a great communion (communication) between thyself and all the world. Philemon, and Apphia, and Archippus are names which stand to me for the refreshment of the church, shown in great hospitality alike for the body and for the soul. Your names are a perpetual joy to me. Now I want to ask a favour—indeed, it is in my heart to press a claim. I could speak with

the boldness of a commandment, but I would rather speak for love's sake in a tone of gracious pleading. Remember that I am a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Remember also that I am now such a one as Paul the aged. I am only between fifty and sixty years of age, which cannot be called old in years,—but remember my strife, my conflict, my continual sorrow, and heaviness of heart; remember how I have suffered many things for the Lord Jesus Christ, and would on no account have suffered one stroke the fewer; remember there is upon me all the care of the churches—neither night nor day have I undisturbed tranquillity. It is, as it were, clothed with all these characteristics that I now come before thee, almost on bended knees, and ask a favour at thy hands. In a word, I want thee to take back the runaway slave Onesimus! Once he was unprofitable, though his name means "profitable." He belies his name. But he is no longer unprofitable, because I

have begotten him in my bonds. He is now a sound-hearted Christian man. In Christ he is my equal and thine. I love him as a man might love a favourite son—at one point, indeed, I thought of accepting him in thine own stead. I know thy kind-heartedness towards me, and that thou wouldst like Onesimus to represent thee in service; but on reflection I think it right that Onesimus should appear in bodily form, put himself within thy reach, subject to all the penalties of the law, or receive from thy hand the sign and token of pardon which I am sure thou wilt not withhold. If Onesimus could be sent back to me, he will be received with the greatest joy, especially as I should feel that I had not then held him of necessity, but, as it were, willingly, a direct and precious benefit conferred by thine own hand. If I look at these matters in their true light, and assign them their largest interpretation, I begin to see that Onesimus departed from thee for a

season that thou shouldst receive him for ever. Our dear Lord spake a parable of the prodigal son. Onesimus was a prodigal slave; now he returns to thee not as a servant, but more than a servant—a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord? The whole matter then comes to this: if I am thy partner, receive Onesimus as if he were myself. From what he has told me I have no doubt that he has been a thief as well as a runaway. I am quite willing to make myself responsible for anything which he may have taken from thee. "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account." I write this bond with mine own hand. I am not going to make a debtor and creditor account of it, saying though I owe thee Onesimus, or hold myself responsible for him, I will not put on the other side of the account the fact that thou dost owe unto me even thine own self. There shall be no debtor

and creditor account in a matter so holy and so tender. Brother, let me have joy in thee: give my spirit rest. I have absolute confidence in thy obedience—nay, more, I am sure that thou wilt also do more than I say. Love does not give in any grudging fashion; its gifts are heaped up, pressed down, running over. I want an answer, as it were, by return: I would hire the lightning to bring back thy reply. I believe a great answer of love will escape thy heart before thou hast time to put it into adequate words. I lay my request before thee, and before thy beloved wife and son; I can add no more. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Suppose we know nothing about the Apostle Paul but what we can infer from his Epistle to the Colossians, and his private letter to Philemon, what estimate would we form of him? How would he rank amongst men as to character, strength, capacity, episcopal

statesmanship? Observe our area of knowledge and inference is for the moment strictly limited to these Epistles. For the time being we have to exclude all other knowledge of the character and service of the Apostle Paul. Are we interested in the man as he is revealed in these Epistles? Does he assume the proportions and the impressiveness of a truly historical study? Is he marked by any high degree of quality? Is he superficial or profound? Is he hypocritical or sincere? He must at some point, and in some way, show his real nature. We are entitled to regard him critically because he makes so large a claim upon our attention.

1. Personally I should have no hesitation in pronouncing Paul, as he is self-portrayed in these Epistles, as an intensely religious man. From beginning to end the tone is sublimely religious. There is no hint of commerce being an element of his religion, or of religion being an aspect of commerce. The religion seems to be simple and definite, without complication, and without suggestion of any ulterior thought or motive. The

Apostle Paul comes forth from the very presence of God. There is a shining upon his face which must have been caught in a high light. He has heard the ineffable psalm of eternity, and he desires to express some note or sob of the far-away music. From no mean hut or gaudy palace of man's building does this weird Apostle come to tell of the littleness of the one or gilded emptiness of the other. He does not appeal to our vision as the white cloud of some transient summer day. The ages are round about him as a garment, the spaces widen themselves into infinity when he attempts to picture their magnitude, and the planet-lights burn into the whitest day that ever transfigured the sky into an emblem of purity. Judged by these Epistles, Paul is a truly great soul. Religion is to him no pastime, no pious recreation, no experiment in intellectual gymnastics. He is not a solver of problems; he is a student of revelations. To Paul religion is awful, lonely, ghostly, "unspeakable, and full of glory." It is along this high level of thought and experience that he comes to us with his grand

appeals. He creates a great hush of expectancy: there can be no common words uttered by a man who has been long closeted with Christ. Great conceptions awaken great interest. This man tells us of mountains that abase all other hills, and make them pimples too small to be counted or measured. This man tells of oceans compared with which all other seas shrink into drops of rain. How great, how solemn, how overpowering are his words! Take a cluster of them: "The inheritance of the saints in light"; "Redemption"; "Forgiveness"; "The Son who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature"; "The Son by whom were all things created, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers"; "The Son in whom it pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell." He speaks of the mystery that hath been hidden from ages and from generations, and he speaks of a blood, precious in the sight of God, that makes forgiveness and holiness possible to mankind. Before such themes other topics fall into silence and slink away in conscious self-contempt. Truly the writer

of these Epistles has been high up in the heavens and has heard words that have stirred his soul.

2. In the next place, Paul is evidently a master in the art of pleading. These Epistles prove him to be an expert in reasoning, in exposition, in appeal. Paul is a workman that needeth not to be ashamed. His sense of proportion amounts to genius. How delicately he approaches Philemon! What self-restraint, yet what vehemence! At this moment we may make some use of what we have heard of Paul in other writings, and may compare words spoken in other connections with the words which specially characterise this Epistle. On one occasion he said, "Being crafty, we caught them with guile." Is there not a sacred cunning in the way which he approaches the all-confiding Philemon? Is he not, with the deftness of an expert, making his points one by one solid and secure as he moves along the line of his calculated approach? On another occasion Paul said, "Weary not in well doing." In other words, "Weary not in

courtesy, in social gentleness, in mutual consideration and esteem." In approaching Philemon, does not Paul obey his own injunction? "Well doing," as the word is employed by Paul, meant courtesy, good manners, studied and sincere amiability. On another occasion Paul said, "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak." Is not this exactly what Paul does as the friend of Onesimus? Paul does not send Onesimus to plead his own cause, or to throw himself penitently and apologetically on the forbearance of his old master. It is Paul that writes the letter; Onesimus only delivers it. On another occasion Paul said, "If a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness." Is not this precisely what Paul is doing in the case of his spiritual child? Is not the Pauline doctrine the greatest restorative that can be applied to a shattered soul?

3. It is perfectly clear, from the method and tone of these Epistles, that if Paul's case fails it cannot be from want of sympathetic

and powerful advocacy. In no mere postscript does Paul refer to Onesimus. There is no casual reference that might easily be overlooked by the receiver of the Epistle. The letter has but one topic, one object, one tone of pleading. It was also characteristic of Paul that when he preached the Gospel he preached it with the same vehemence and holy zeal. If the sermon failed, the blame of the failure could not be attributed to the illustrious Apostle. He reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, until corrupt men whitened and trembled, and begged for release from his piercing and tormenting eloquence. For Paul to live was Christ. Without a Gospel to preach he would have been without a reason to live. This is the man as he unconsciously delineates his own personality. He is a great character; in very deed he is a pillar of the Church. We can have no doubt that he saw a literal vision when he beheld the shining of the crown that was laid up awaiting his entrance into the higher service.

THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS

INTRODUCTION

THE Apostle Paul now begins his epistolary ministry. A brief account of his service at Thessalonica may be useful as indicating some of the principal associations which the great Apostle had with that conspicuous city. In Acts xvii. 2–10 we read as follows:

> "And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few. But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; whom Jason hath received: and these

> all do contrary to the decrees of Cæsar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go. And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews."

The degree of hostility shown to Paul by the Thessalonian Jews seems to determine the fervour of his love to the Thessalonian Christians. From beginning to end the Epistle overflows with all the noblest Christian emotions. The Apostle is as one who would comfort hearts that are in great distress. If the Epistle may be compared to a vessel, there can be no hesitation in describing the vessel as overflowing with the very wine of human love. From a literary point of view there is next to no attempt at merely verbal or rhetorical composition. The Apostle Paul is never rhetorical in the sense of mere fluency, or in the sense of elaborate tropes and resonant periods; but he is often driven into entrancing rhetoric by the intensity and nobleness of his spiritual argument. About this

Epistle there is nothing that is mechanical or formal. In a sense the Epistle is desultory; that is to say, the writer leaps suddenly and almost startlingly from one topic to another, hardly pausing to complete one argument until he has set up another. The fine mixture of personal recollection and doctrinal statement can hardly escape the most casual attention. This is Paul's first epistle to the churches, almost the first attempt at any kind of Christian authorship of a purely theological or doctrinal kind. The first love-letter to the churches! The first outpouring of the greatest heart known in Christian experience! Truly we may follow the example of Moses, and turn aside to see this great sight. Here is a bush blazing with fire, but unconsumed. Out of this bush there may come voices that will enable us to recall solemnly and thrillingly some of the tones that proceeded from the bush at the foot of Horeb. First of all let us familiarise ourselves with the main points of the Epistle by setting it forth in a kind of pictorial paraphrase; and afterwards, as in the case of Colossians, let us take the Epistle verse by

verse, and see what it yields of Christian instruction and spiritual unction.

> Paul, and Silvanus (Silas), and Timotheus, evangelists of Christ, living, and moving, and having our being in God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, would send unto you the best desires of our grateful hearts. May grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! May the very air you breathe be balmy with blessing! You can have no idea how fervently we thank God concerning you all, making mention of you whenever the hour of prayer recurs, remembering from moment to moment your wonderful work of faith, and toil of love, and patience of hope. In very deed you are brethren beloved by God; you are the elect of the Father. We know your election by the sure sign that when you heard the word of God you received it not verbally only, but

spiritually and with deep conviction. Ye know what manner of men we became amongst you for your sakes. We studied your character and circumstances carefully, and we accommodated ourselves to the degree of your intelligence, and the fervour of your zeal. We cannot but remember that you became imitators of us and of the Lord, carefully following our footsteps as we zealously endeavoured to follow the footsteps of our glorious Master. The whole occasion was most memorable to us because you did not receive the Gospel on a summer day, amidst balmy breezes enriched with the fragrance of aromatic flowers, but you received the word amidst much distress. Your circumstances represented an intense trial, but this trial you overcame by the inward presence of the Holy Spirit. By the realisation of that Spirit you counterbalanced all the afflictions and trials with which your new life was besieged. You not only became receivers of the Gospel—

you became a medium through which the Gospel was sounded out, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but practically everywhere. A wonderful voice has proceeded from you and gone forth throughout Macedonia and Achaia, so that you have to a large extent superseded the work of missionaries and evangelists. Everywhere we hear of the consequences of our evangelistic visit. We hear that you have thrown away a senseless idolatry, a futile and enervating superstition, and that you are cleaving with steadfastness to the living and real God, whose Son you are expecting out of the heavens—the Son whom God raised out of the dead, even Jesus, who with a mighty arm delivers and rescues from the wrath that cometh.

I need not recall to your minds how that our entrance in unto you was not in vain. In no way did it prove to be vain. You knew what sufferings we had undergone, and

how shamefully entreated we were at Philippi, and you can testify that our sufferings had in no way quelled our courage or staggered our faith. It sometimes seems to us that our sufferings gave new nerve to our courage, and enabled us to speak with a firmer boldness all that we knew of the mystery of the Gospel. We were not men who spake unto you after the manner of deceit, or uncleanness, or guile. There was no trick or conjuring in our conduct of the evangelistic ministry. We regarded ourselves as put in trust with the Gospel: we were the stewards of God; fraudulence did not enter into our scheme or purpose; as the stewards of the ministry of God we had but one object in view, and we thank God that we were enabled to challenge all men to convict us of any unworthy thought or intention. Perhaps, in the estimation of the world, we cared too little for what is known as personal fame or popularity. We never used the

language of flattery. We can truly say that to please men was a thought that never entered into our minds. We rebuked many, and consequently we set many in an attitude of hostility; but all this was inevitable, as such was the burden of the Lord upon us, and such His thrilling call to sacrifice and to service. So careful were we that our purpose should not be impaired in its integrity that we would not be burdensome to you as the apostles of Christ. We might have pressed some reasonable and honourable claims upon you; but lest the Gospel should be misunderstood or hindered, we refrained even from the appearance of being burdensome. Ours was the spirit of a gentle motherhood; and because we were affectionately desirous of you all, we were well pleased not only to tell all we knew of the Gospel of God—we were prepared to forfeit our own lives if by any means we might save some. You know we were not idle

amongst you. You remember our toil and labour—how we turned night into day, and how we worked with our own hands in order to earn our own bread. All these considerations you must keep before your minds, not only as so many happy memories, but as so many strong points in a high argument. Some day we may have need to call for witness as to the purity and unselfishness of our service, and in that day it will be our joy to call you Thessalonian brethren as our witnesses, how holily and justly and unblamably we were amongst you. You will be able to say that we were amongst you as a father, encouraging you, and comforting you, and appealing to you, our desire being that ye might walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto His kingdom and glory.

How gratefully and fervently we thank God without ceasing, that you received the word of God from our

lips, not as the word of men, but even as it is truly the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe. There was nothing foolishly individual or ostentatiously independent about you. In our Thessalonian work we were unconscious of any desire on your part to lead where it was your duty only to follow. You became imitators of the congregations of God which are in Judæa. You suffered the same things by your countrymen that the Christians received at the hands of the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. One in suffering, you became with them one in service, in conduct, and in hope. All bad men we must leave in the hands of God, for the divine wrath will come upon them unto completion. Avenge not yourselves. Rejoice always, and commit yourselves to unceasing prayer, and God will see to the honour of His own name. We have felt our separation from you,

but we rejoice that we were only orphaned from you for an hour or two, and we were orphaned in face only, not in heart. We feel as if bereaved of our children, and you probably feel as if bereaved of your parents. Let not your heart be troubled, the separation is in face only; not for a moment is there any orphanhood of heart. Our separation made us long for you with great desire. We would have come to you once and again, but Satan hindered us. Difficulties were thrown in our way which we could not trace to the divine providence, and for which we could only account by the most malignant agency. Brethren, you do not know how much you are to us. You are our wreath of triumph; our hope and joy; the sheaves which will yield us bread in the hour of hunger and distress.

I had a severe trial at Athens. You know that I have but little

company in working out my perilous and fateful apostleship. I was so anxious about you, anxious to know your spiritual condition, that I sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, that he might communicate with you, and establish and encourage you concerning your faith. I could not but wonder how you would bear your sorrow. Even whilst we were with you we told you that we should have to suffer tribulations, and that the tempter would deal sorely with us. Now that Timotheus is back again we are encouraged and thankful, and our very affliction and distress have been sanctified by means of your faith. Now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. You have fought the good fight, and won the promised victory. We joy for your sakes before our God. We feel as if we wanted to give you something out of the treasure with which God has enriched our own hearts. God bring us together again soon, that in a

common fellowship we may find a common joy. May the Lord make you increase and abound in your love towards each other and towards all, even as we also abound in love towards you. God establish your hearts in holiness. God enable you by a new and ever-brightening vision to see how the Lord Jesus and His holy ones are always coming from heaven.

There is one remaining thing to which I must call your attention. You know our desires and prayers for you. Now, in the Lord Jesus, I exhort you to walk and to please God in the one thing which I am about to name. We wish you to stand fast in Gospel purity, and in this to abound more and more. You know what commandments or announcements we transmitted unto you by the Lord Jesus. As the word of command is passed from soldier to soldier, and from teacher to teacher, so we continue the

holy announcement that the will of God is your sanctification. That is the great end and purpose of Gospel doctrine and practice. Without holiness no man shall see the Lord. But holiness is not a state that can be reached by leaps and bounds; it is the last point in an often slow evolution. If you would acquire true holiness, you will have to begin by cutting off favourite sins and giving a distinct "No" to subtle and insistent temptations. Some of you can hardly begin in the soul; you can only make a beginning in the body. In this case holiness begins by abstinence—abstinence from bodily evil, from every form of bodily debasement, from the very vulgarity of sin. Having taken up this negative position, you have not made a very large advance in the direction of holiness—but most assuredly you have made an advance in the right direction, and what you have to do is to persevere until that which is almost a cruel

sacrifice becomes a spiritual delight. You must be got out of the merely animal state. It is an infinite discredit to a man that he should herd with the cattle or find satisfaction with the beasts of the jungle. In Jesus Christ men are called to a higher manhood, to a nobler temperance, to an exemplary moderation. A man may begin as an almost beast, then he may proceed to a Gentile licentiousness; but only in Christ Jesus can he by faith and grace pass into the state of consecration. Know, brethren beloved, that God has called you unto holiness. To make His call effective He has given unto you His Holy Spirit. The function of the Holy Spirit is to make holy men. In the degree in which you aspire after holiness you may rest assured that the Holy Spirit is operating mightily within your soul. This is the one remaining thing which I wish to say, and of which I make a special and even an essential point.

Whatever exhortation you may need in the matter of bodily consecration, happily, I need not say a word to you regarding brotherly love. There you are an example to all the churches. Ye yourselves are taught of God to the end that ye should love one another. It is delightful to us to observe how the spirit of brotherliness prevails in your souls. In the matter of brotherly love you are the benefactors and teachers of us all; your example tells upon all the brethren in the whole of Macedonia. Do let us encourage you to abound more and more, to renounce all foolish ambition, to find enjoyment in quietness, and satisfaction in honest personal labour. Not only have you to show brotherly love to all who are fellow-believers, but you have to walk becomingly and honestly towards those who are without. Every outward want must be supplied by your own honest labour; then you will be able so to live as not to bring upon yourselves the suspicion that you only do social

good that you may secure social reward.

Now a word upon another subject. I would not that ye be ignorant concerning them that are laid to sleep, that ye be not grieved even like pagans who have no hope. You can look upon your lost friends in one of two ways—you can regard them as utterly blotted out, as having no more place or force in all the creation of God, or you can regard them as promoted to a higher scene, introduced into a nobler fellowship, engaged in a loftier and wider service. With regard to those of us who are Christians this matter has been settled for us. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and for that reason we have the glad assurance that all those who sleep in Jesus, who are laid to sleep on His breast, shall God bring with Him. That is the Christian conception of the future life. If it were but an ideal, it would take its place at the very head of all other

conceptions of death and its issues. We stand or fall in Jesus Christ. If Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, then the future of Christian believers is an assured immortality. When you think of the branch, think of the root. No man can rise of himself, but every man can rise in Christ Jesus. About all this we have a grand poetic conception. We believe that the Lord Himself, in the voice of archangel and in trumpet of God, even amidst the trumpetings of the Eternal One, shall descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ shall rise, and as for those of us who may be living at the time, we shall be caught away amidst the clouds unto the meeting of the Lord in the air. We do not know how all this is to come to pass. In the meantime our souls are fixed upon a great faith, upon a faith so grand, indeed, that it can afford calmly to leave all details as to method and time in the hands of God. Encourage one another with these words. Do not disquiet your-

selves by going in quest of verbal criticism and statement, but fill your souls with the idea that when Christ appears ye also shall appear with Him in glory, and fix your minds upon the ennobling thought that your life stands or falls with the life of Christ. How glad you should be in thinking of these things! How lifted above all petty anxiety, and how independent of the perplexing criticisms of men whose piety is constantly limited by the narrow and spiritless letter! Never let your courage go down. Lift up your souls to the hills, whence cometh your help, and know that the Christian rests upon the promise, even upon the oath of Him who died for the sins of the world. The Redeemer who shed His precious blood is not likely to make light of the word or oath of His own soul.

When I speak of these great events you will naturally wish me to go into precise details as to time and seasons,

but really there is no reason for me to write anything upon such points. You yourselves know that every day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. It is much better to have a general faith than to vex the mind with particular details. You know that you will die, but you have no idea as to the particular day of your death. So let it be in the matter of the coming of the Lord. The fact is perfectly sure, but what the hour will be is a secret of the Lord. When men shall say, "Peace and safety," then a sudden destruction sets upon them. Put no faith in ignorant human forecasts. It is enough for you to know that there is a day of the Lord, and that it will surely come. You need not walk in darkness: you are the children of light, and the children of the day; we are not of the night nor of darkness. Let us not sleep, as do others, but let us live in wakefulness and sobriety. They who sleep, sleep by night, and those who become

drunken are drunken in the night; but with the night we have nothing to do. We are children of the day, citizens of the great metropolis of light. On our breast is the thick plate of faith and love, and our head-covering, our helmet, is nothing less than a hope of salvation. God has not appointed us to wrath, but to acquire salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that whether we must be awake, or whether we must sleep, we might live together with Him. Fix your minds and hearts on the all-saving truth that Christ's death was followed and completed by His resurrection for the express purpose to secure for us a vital union with Himself. Not our bodies, but our souls, are in vital and indissoluble union with Christ. "The world seeth Me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also." Edify yourselves, build up one another, belong to one another as parts of the same great structure. Regard yourselves as a living temple—

the very house or sanctuary of God. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God?" If you would really comfort yourselves, you must edify one another. Every man can help to build up some other man's character.

Brethren, recognise and appreciate those who minister to you in spiritual things. You cannot understand how truly dear you are to the pastoral heart. Do not withdraw your encouragement from those who are over you in the Lord simply because they may sometimes admonish and even rebuke you. A rebuke may be the beginning of a benediction. Esteem your ministers and spiritual leaders exceeding highly in love because of their work. Always be at peace among yourselves. You as a church have a great disciplinary work to do, inasmuch as you have to warn them that are unruly, and comfort the feeble-minded; you have to support the weak, and to be patient and

longsuffering with all men. Remember the Master, and forbear yourselves when tempted to render evil for evil to any man. Remember when Christ was reviled he reviled not again. Always set before you a high example, and follow that which is good with a steady, patient desire and service. Do not regard these exhortations as intended to depress and discourage you. We rather call upon you to rejoice always, and to pray unceasingly. In everything give thanks, for this is God's will in His Son Jesus Christ. Never quench the Holy Spirit; never even grieve the Spirit. Do not despise the highest gifts which Christ has conferred upon his Church. We exhort you not to despise prophesyings. The Church will always have its prophets, and its high moods, and its thrilling enthusiasms—and it is never for men of cold nature or uninspired temper to criticise the prophets whom God hath clothed with singing robes, and whom God hath commissioned to

declare the highest mysteries of His kingdom. Give reason its due place in your Christian education—prove, test, try everything, and hold fast that which is good. From every evil appearance abstain: then the very God of peace will sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blamelessly unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The divine faithfulness is your security; the gift and calling of God are without repentance. God will redeem His oath. Brethren, pray for us. Salute the brethren all of them in a holy kiss. Let this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren. If you have any divine treasure, call others to share it. Farewell. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

CHAPTER I

THIS is emphatically an Epistle from the heart, and is in a sense more social in its authority than individual. Three men are taking part in the action of this Epistle. Paul does not represent himself as officially superior to Silvanus and Timotheus. The title "Apostle" is omitted, and the three men proceed in a threefold unity to touch upon some of the great mysteries and commandments of the Christian Gospel. Paul is the undoubted author of the Epistle, but he speaks so definitely in the plural number that Silvanus and Timotheus may be regarded as fellow-authors of this letter of wisdom and love. The circumstance is by no means insignificant. Jesus Christ Himself is never associated with any other speaker or writer. He communicated with men as from the sanctuary of eternity; and when He elected

to be represented by a ministry of men, the election was personal, sovereign, and absolute. The apostles represent, not displace or supersede, Christ. Whether Paul writes in his own name or associates himself with the names of fellow-labourers, they all together go back to Christ as their origin, and establish themselves upon his authority as supreme and indivisible.

> Verse 1: "Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ."

This is the atmosphere in which the whole Epistle is conceived and put together. The apostolic letters were never mere literary fragments; they were written as if at the throne of God and issued with all the solemnity and sanctity of conscious eternity. The apostolic letters are fine specimens of sanctified criticism. They were never bare letters or mere intellectual efforts, or simply social ceremonies; they are first of all and last of all deeply and intensely religious. The Apostles had nothing to say of themselves; they were interpreters of a mystery, or the channels of a blessing.

Verse 2: "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers."

Out of such an introduction what can come but peace and blessing and multiplied tokens of brotherhood? Good counsel can only be given effectively in a good spirit. Any failure or weakness at the religious point means stumbling and ineffectiveness at points supposed to be practical and operative. When we truly pray for our correspondents we can write to them with edification. Whenever the Thessalonian church, for which Paul must have had peculiar affection, occurred to the minds of the writers, it impelled them to fervent prayer that all the joy of heaven might be ministered to them as they were able to receive the ineffable gladness.

Verse 3: "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father."

In the Thessalonian church speculation was superseded by work. What a happy connection of terms is this of work and faith, labour and love, patience and hope! This

is an instance of the finest spiritual discipline. It is also a striking illustration of the working of the law of cause and effect. For example, where there is faith there must be work, and where there is right work there must be the right faith. Where there is love there must be labour, and where there is consecrated labour there must be love after the quality of Christ's own affection. Where there is patience it must be because there is hope, and where there is hope there will be no difficulty in supplying the necessary patience. The work, the faith, the labour, the love, the hope, are all connected with the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and are regarded as being practised and exemplified in the sight of God our Father. Here are no frivolous personal compliments. Here there is no indication that the Thessalonians were straining themselves in an almost impossible attempt to be impossibly good. The apostolic salutation may well be described as an apostolic argument. All the wonders of the spiritual life of the church of Thessalonica are ascribed to the almightiness and the all-graciousness of the Spirit of God. Men may

paint apples, but only God can grow them. Men may make great efforts at goodness and strain themselves to the point of exhaustion, or even destruction; but they can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth them. He is the enabling Christ—the Christ who gives power and whose power makes every Christian effort a thrilling delight.

> Verses 4, 5: "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake."

Here again we have marked distinctions in the application of terms, notably in the case of "word" as distinguished from "power," and of "men" as distinguished from the "Holy Ghost." Up to this point we have had mention only of God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, but now we have definite reference to the personality and power of the Holy Ghost. There is a distressing possibility that men may know the Gospel only in the word or letter. Men may admire the Psalms without singing them, or men may sing the words of the

Psalms without knowing the power and the comfort of their spirit. There is also a distressing possibility that in hearing the Gospel men may listen rather to the eloquence than to the doctrine. Truly such hearing means loss to the soul and the possible loss of the soul itself. The heart knows when it is being penetrated and searched by the power of the Gospel. The Gospel affects motive, temper, disposition, and moulds character, and constrains character to interpret and explain itself in ungrudging and helpful service on behalf of others. The Gospel does not come to the heart as an argument that is barely sufficient, or as an answer that narrowly meets the necessities of the soul—it comes in power and in much assurance, like proof upon proof, evidence upon evidence, mountain piled upon mountain, as if the altitude might touch the very vicinage of heaven. Christians are not narrowly saved—saved with an effort, saved with distress to the Saviour, as if one ounce added to the burden would crush His strength; they are saved abundantly, with an immeasurable overflow of strength; they are

saved with all the fulness of the love of God. By omitting the article and leaving "Holy Ghost" to stand alone we come upon a declaration of the enthusiasm and the passion which are properly connected with the whole idea and purpose of the Gospel; then the passage might read, "The Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power and in enthusiasm, and in holy passion, and in sevenfold assurance of your acceptance with God." You saw what we were when we were amongst you. You caught the holy contagion. We burned in a common fever of love.

> Verses 6, 7: "And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: so that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia."

The word "followers" must not be understood as equal to "disciples," as if the writers of the Epistle were supreme teachers and the Thessalonian believers were only pupils. The Thessalonians were regarded as "imitators," as following the apostles and teachers as the apostles and teachers followed

Christ. The faith of the Thessalonians was tested by "much affliction." This is the true test of the sincerity and reality of faith. Have we been tried in the furnace? Have we tested our faith under circumstances of loss and pain and helplessness? Where the Gospel is only an intellectual possession, some thief may break through and steal; when we have known the power of Christ in the furnace, or in the wilderness, or in the valley of the shadow of death, our life is hid with Christ in God, and no thief can deprive us of such unspeakable wealth. The holy church of Thessalonica became a model church. There is a unit of the individual; there is a unit of the church; there is a unit of the nation. Instead of "ensamples" read "ensample," and then you are face to face with the idea that the church in its corporate capacity represented an almost personal spiritual beauty and strength.

Verses 8–10: "For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything. For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to

> God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come."

Here is a marked illustration of the ever-widening influence of true spirituality of soul. The influence of the Thessalonians could not be confined to Roman Greece; it went out to the regions beyond, sounding over and over again, until those who were far off heard and answered the solemn music. It was not necessary to say anything about work at Thessalonica; the work spoke for itself. This must always be the case. The work must announce or report its own energy and beneficence, otherwise anything that can be said about it will be mere fleshly demonstration or unmusical noise. The Church of Christ must be so penetrated by the Spirit of Christ that those who are outside can have no difficulty in believing in the fundamental doctrine of the Incarnation of God. The Apostle insists that conversion is not a mere change of opinion, or a simple variety of attitude; it is a complete turning to God, to serve the living and true God,

and to hold in utterest contempt the paltry idols that once fascinated our imagination or seduced us into irrational obedience after the manner of superstition, and not after the manner of the highest reason. We best wait for the Son of God from heaven by serving the living and true God upon earth. Our time of waiting is shortened by our diligence and energy in service. If we sit down under the pretence that we are waiting for the descending Christ, this one day shall be as a thousand years; but if we work mightily and lovingly in a very fury of holy passion, then our waiting will be no longer a burden, or an oppressive sense of time—a thousand years will be as one day.

CHAPTER II

Verses 1, 2: "For yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain: but even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention."

YOU remember our coming amongst you, and you will confirm my word when I remind you that our anxiety did not prove in vain. The visit did not end in itself; it was followed by very striking and memorable consequences. This is the way in which we must always measure our conduct throughout the whole development of the Christian life. This is also the true way of giving religious reports, or representing religious statistics. We are not content with the numeral facts; we must carry our whole inspired imagination into the necessary train of sequences. How large, then, may become what is in itself

an insignificant circumstance! If we look at the acorn as a quantity which a child may handle, we shall be doing injustice to the possibilities of that pregnant seed. We must look forward to the oak and all its living acorns, and beyond that we must look to the forests which are thus represented in possibility. If we so regard Christian work, we shall understand how true it is that "there shall be a handful of corn on the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon."

Our visit to you would have been utterly futile, an event without record or memory, if we had allowed ourselves to be overborne or disheartened by the persecutions we had endured at Philippi, where we were outraged and treated with all manner of contumely and insult. We came to you fresh from the furnace of suffering, and with undaunted courage we took up the work for which we had suffered so severely. The scars which were upon our wounded flesh were so many insignia of honour. We kissed our wounds as a rewarded soldier might kiss his medals,

and we took heart to dare the enemy with steadfast courage in the open field. You remember that we were almost audacious; our mouth was open, and out of it streamed speech, free and candid. We did not muffle our voices because our backs had been flagellated. Our Gospel was the Gospel of God, or the Gospel in God. You see how constantly we go back to the sanctuary for the renewal of our courage and the restoration of our strength. We do not forget the contention with which we were confronted; the struggle, the conflict, the fight, we must remember for ever. We struggled against difficulties, and we overcame them all; we endured distress, and passed through the darkened aisles of trouble and forsakeness into the crystal sanctuary of light and peace and triumphant music.

> Verses 3, 4: "For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile: but as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts."

This is the explanation of our frankness or audacity. If we had been speaking out

of a doubtful mind, we should have spoken in a hesitant tone. It is faith that determines a man's service. If we had been conscious of any misgivings about our doctrine or any suspicions as to our motives, then, indeed, our fortitude would have forsaken us; our tone might have been blatant, but it would have lacked the military tone, the piercing warrior pæan which is a sure sign of inward and spiritual strength. We did not suffer from a deceitful or wandering mind, which always accompanies religious delusion and speculative uncertainty. When the preacher is uncertain in his own soul it is impossible that his trumpet can give a certain sound. In the whole Christian ministry holiness is power. We received our ministry from God, by whom we were put in trust with the Gospel. God made us trustees of the holy oracles. Paul was entrusted with a stewardship. He says, "A dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me" (1 Cor. ix. 17). And again he says, "According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust" (1 Tim. i. 11). He who has been face to face with God will not fear

the face of man. We do not like to be men-pleasers or eye-servants. "If I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal. i. 10). We made no pretence amongst you that we were seeking mere popularity; from the beginning to the end of our ministry we honestly sought the smile of God.

> Verses 5–9: "For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness: nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: so being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God."

We know that in addressing multitudes of men there is a strong temptation to speak flattering words. Instead of eliciting cheers we evoked every possible sign of contempt and revulsion. If we had been speaking in our own name, we might have been seduced into flattery. We might have thrown over our shoulders a cloak of covetousness and

self-seeking; but we were the stewards of God, and it is expected of stewards that a man be found trustworthy. We did not even flatter you, our friends and superiors. We sought no glory from you; we never insisted on our rights; we were jealous of ourselves lest we might become burdensome to you, thus making a kind of merchandise of your Christian faith. A fearless ministry will often be tempestuous, but in the end it will bring in its train the infinite peace of God. Remember that we were gentle amongst you; no nurse could be tenderer. We regarded you as our children, and we were affectionately desirous of you. Our hearts longed for you—they went out to you in great solicitude and yearning; so we kept nothing back from you. If you could have been benefited by our flesh and blood, we were prepared to lay down our lives for Christ's sake, because ye were dear unto us. We found a great reward in our working. Our preaching was mixed up with labour night and day, for we were most anxious that in nothing should the gospel of the love of God be hindered. We asked for no wages,

we coveted no applause; our travail and our sorrow constituted our reward.

> Verses 10–12: "Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: as ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children, that ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto His kingdom and glory."

We do not forget what God enabled us to do in your midst. We are not boasting of our unselfishness; we are magnifying the grace of God, who enabled us to interpret the Gospel through the medium of our secular independence. We walked holily, justly, and without blame before God and towards man. You must in part interpret our doctrine by our character. If we had preached one thing and lived another, we should stand openly convicted and should deserve the wrath of God. Do not misunderstand us. Again and again I would say that this is no boasting on our part; it is a tribute to the unfailing grace of God. Nor are we boasting of our strength as if everything came easily to us. Ours was not a grace, but a virtue; that is to say, it was not natural piety, or indifference to

secular and social circumstances. Our souls were put under a great stress, so that the result was not as fruit that blooms in the sun, but as a trophy that is taken in war. If we remember our courage, we remember also our tenderness, the fatherly love which flows out to the children. God is great in might; if possible, He is still greater in mercy. You must not only think of us as great warriors, but as gentle fathers, mothers, and nurses. The warrior fights on the battlefield, but the father ministers at home. We bore the strain of our solicitude and our anxious love because we thought we saw in you such growth in grace as warranted us in believing that you were daily walking with God and entering into ever-deepening fellowship with the spirit of His kingdom. The kingdom of God is a present possession. The glory of God is a present vision. The kingdom and the glory are both present and future. "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son" (Col. i. 13). In another passage the Apostle Paul refers to the kingdom of God as the future and expected inheritance:

"The Lord will preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. iv. 18). After the same manner Peter delivers himself: "An entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter i. 11). We must not part with the word "glory" when we think of the present possession and the future realisation of the divine kingdom. Glory is, as it were, the very light of light—an effulgence that issues from some unseen and infinite fountain of radiance. It is a word which Jesus Christ himself used: "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" (John xi. 40.) There is a noontide in Christian experience—a time of summer cloudlessness, the very zenith of spiritual pomp. When we realise the glory of that zenith in our earthly experience we may so multiply it as to gladden our souls with some impression of what the glory must be which is yet to be revealed. "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. viii. 18). Paul comforts the Corinthian

Christians, and through them the whole Church of God, by speaking of "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," which is to drive out of our minds our momentary endurance of light afflictions.

> Verse 13: "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."

We gladly remember how eagerly you accepted the word of God which you heard of us. You did not only listen to it; you received it, you accepted it, you eagerly appropriated it, and made it as the food and nutriment of your souls. This was evident, because the word of God effectually worked in you who believed. It was not a merely intellectual luxury—it was a moral discipline, and it came out most expressively and helpfully in the very conduct and manner of your life. Your doctrine was not a dead dogma; it was an operative force. "Faith works by love" (Gal. v. 6); "The power of God which worketh in us" (Eph. iii. 20).

Verses 14–16: "For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judæa are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews: who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost."

Remember that you belong to a glorious succession. The churches of God are not separated from one another like unrelated diamonds. The living churches of the living God are part of a great redemptive scheme and mediation. They are partakers of a common suffering. You yourselves have suffered many things of your own countrymen. Remember that the Jews killed the Lord Jesus Christ, and their own prophets drove us out, and they are hostile to all men. They are filling up the vessel of their own sin, and it will become to them as the cup of the divine wrath. Do not imagine that bad men carry all things their own way, and that they live at a table of luxury and delight, turning the very blood of the Christian household into wine which their

drunken souls can drink. True, indeed, they have their revels, their nightly carousals, bacchanalian orgies; but they little know that they are filling up a great cup of judgment which they will have to drink to the dregs. We do not see the whole scheme of providence yet. A veil may be drawn over the judgment which means wrath, as well as over the judgment which means heaven. By-and-by we shall see how bad men have been fattening for the slaughter, and what terrible vengeance God will take upon those who have despised His name. Some men reject the Gospel by hindering it; some men hinder the Gospel by rejecting it. God will judge. His glittering sword has lost nothing of the keenness of its edge.

> Verses 17–20: "But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For ye are our glory and joy."

But we must not dwell altogether upon

the fearful side of divine providence. He would be a foolish teacher who ignored the dark cloud in which the divine thunderbolt slumbers; but he would be unwiser still who does not turn his eyes to the Shechinah which glows upon the Christian host with a brightness above the brightness of the sun. We are orphaned from you for a moment—for an hour at the most; but our hearts have never been sundered, for they are one in Christ. Satan has his little momentary triumphs. He hindered us once and again from coming to you, but his hindrance cannot endure for ever. We shall not be kept back from our hope and joy and crown of rejoicing. "Dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown" (Phil. iv. 1). We are coming to you, and you are coming to us, and Jesus is coming to us both, and we are going to Jesus—and out of all this coming and going there shall arise a holy fellowship, a glorious and indestructible brotherhood.

CHAPTER III

Verses 1–3: "Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; and sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow-labourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith: that no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto."

SO anxious was the Apostle to have precise tidings respecting his friends at Thessalonica that he preferred loneliness in a foreign city to the gnawing anxiety which tormented his heart respecting his unseen friends. There were people enough at Athens, but no companions of the soul; plenty of noise, but no music; swarms of people, but no kindred hearts. To part with Timotheus under such circumstances was indeed to incur a great loss, whether Timotheus himself was directly sent, or whether the meaning is that Paul sent him a message entreating him, if

not commanding him, to go back from Berea to Thessalonica before he followed Paul into Greece. It comes to the same thing in regard to the Apostle's personal anxiety as to the spiritual welfare of his friends. Sometimes one heart is all the world to us. So it must oftentimes have been with the Apostle in his lonely travels. When he said, "Only Luke is with me," only those who have passed through the mystery of heart-solitude can understand the depth of his emotion. At one period the Apostle was utterly forsaken of men, yet with a cry of triumph he exclaimed, "Notwithstanding, the Lord stood by me!" We know from the Acts of the Apostles that Paul was not long idle at Athens. The Thessalonians needed confirmation—the Athenians needed instruction and spiritual enlightenment. Timotheus could comfort the church; Paul could rouse and evangelise the world. In effect, Paul said to the Thessalonians, "Though you knew that afflictions must come, yet even the strongest of us must have encouragement and support in the hour of trial." It is always so in human discipline; though we know that afflictions, and offences,

and sharpest trials must come, God never allows affliction to fall without supplying the balm and the comfort needed by human suffering.

> Verses 4, 5: "For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know. For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain."

You had warning enough about the coming affliction, but the soul cannot live upon warning. Warning may represent the negative aspect of experience, whilst comfort and confirmation may well represent its positive aspect. It is not enough that we know there is an enemy of souls; it is also required that the soul shall be continually energised and fortified by the ministry of the Holy Ghost. We need men like Paul to care for us. "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak." God has so ordained His providence that man can comfort man and thus help to repel the seductions and temptations of the evil one. The enemy is always busy with hearts that are undergoing

the process of sanctification. We must remember in the hour of assault that no temptation has happened unto us but such as is common to man.

> Verses 6–8: "But now when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you: therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith: for now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord."

The Apostle responded to good news. A father is glad when his son brings home from school a good certificate: a record of good behaviour is to the parental soul as a gospel from God. The assurance that the afflicted one has passed some difficult point in the illness and is now looking forward to restoration is joy unspeakable. Pastors can receive no greater encouragement than to hear that those whom God has permitted them to convert are standing fast in the faith, and abounding in all the usefulness of growing service. Let a pastor know that his work is bearing fruit and he will by that intelligence be comforted in all his affliction and

distress. The Apostle grew young again when he discovered that his Thessalonian disciples were standing fast in the Lord. What artist is not gratified by the satisfactory completion of his picture? What architect is not comforted when the last stone is brought on with shoutings of "Grace, grace, unto it"? What father is not rejoiced when his son becomes a man in years and in social status? It is even so with apostles, ministers, and teachers; when the seed they have sown springs up and gives promise of good fruit, their souls are filled with thankfulness and their lips thrill with praise.

> Verses 9, 10: "For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?"

How can we repay God for the good news which we have received concerning you? This good news has put a new song into our mouth, so much so that our daily service is a daily psalm. Wherever we go people hear us loudly singing, and when they ask the

reason of our delight, our transport and our joy, we cannot but declare unto them the miracles of grace which have been wrought in the church of Thessalonica. In this work of thanksgiving night and day have become as one, and now we have no broken time, for the psalm of gratitude flows through all the hours and makes the night as the day, and the day sevenfold in brightness.

> Verses 11–13: "Now God Himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: to the end He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints."

You have only begun the Christian course. Sometimes we think that the Christian course can never be more than a beginning—so much has to be done in the culture and perfecting of the soul in the light and truth and comfort of God. Our prayer is that the Lord may make you increase and abound in love towards each other and towards all, even as we also abound in love towards you. Never stand still in the divine life. Never attempt

to put a period to the process of spiritual enlightenment and edification. Prove that you abound in love towards God by abounding in love one towards another. Out of all this love there will come a great establishing of the heart in holiness before God. Love is discipline. Love makes itself known by inspired courage and unceasing beneficence. Christianity must be translated into character if ever it is to impress the world and constrain men to cry out that surely where the conduct is so noble the motive must be of kindred quality. Brethren, the Lord Jesus Christ is coming, always coming, almost visibly coming; we are to live in high expectation that He may in some way or other come to His Church as sunshine comes to flowers wet with the dews of night. See that you do not interpret the coming of the Lord too narrowly. Wherever there is increase of love, wherever there is a deepening regard for truth, wherever there is a broader and tenderer charity, wherever there is a growing up into the very love of God—where, I say, these things are manifest, so manifest as to be indisputable, be sure that the Lord is at hand,

and that His kingdom is being set up as the sovereignty that will subdue all rival ideas of health and progress and rest. Where Christianity comes, Christ comes. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the Lord Himself is. Instead, therefore, of looking for any sign that is visible or transient, let us look for those better signs discernible only by the soul and which abide with the soul as lights that cannot be extinguished.

CHAPTER IV

Verse 1: "Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more."

AS we are struck by the maturity of the Apostle's own character and service, so we cannot but be impressed by the immature condition of the spiritual life of the Thessalonian Christians. The letter might have been written to little children in the Lord. How much exhortation they needed! How important it was that they should set before themselves the high object of pleasing God! How essential that they should not drop even into a moment's idleness, because of the energy and cruelty of the tempter who was continually watching their souls! We must never forget in reading the Epistles that they were addressed to persons who represented the most elementary form of

Christian life. The early churches of Christ were in many respects hardly distinguished from the nations of the world. Hence the need of patience on the part of the Apostles, and hence the need of continual reminders even of the simplest discipline and duty. We are entitled to go to the Apostles themselves for a very high illustration of Christian faith and conduct, but we are not entitled to make the early churches models of Christian holiness and consecration. We must always distinguish between the writer and the receiver of an apostolic epistle.

> Verses 2–8: "For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: that no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us His holy Spirit."

The Apostle falls back upon the simple commandments which had been given to

the Thessalonians by the Lord Jesus, and calls upon his friends at Thessalonica to remember that God's will desired nothing short of the consecration or sanctification of Christian believers. This holy work began, as it were, in its more practical aspects, from the outside, though in Christian life nothing can succeed externally that does not express the working of an inward and spiritual motive. The church at Thessalonica was in the most infantile stages of personal discipline. The members of the church had to be told just like little children to watch their conduct and to control their manners. Every member of the body was to be disciplined with the discipline of Christ. The hand, the eye, and every other member of the body was to be held in servitude, and to be pressed into the service of the soul. The blood was never to be so feverish as to discourage or thwart the upward desires of the spirit. "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you?" (1 Cor. vi. 19.) "The body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God hath both raised up the Lord,

and will also raise up us by His own power" (1 Cor. vi. 13, 14). "He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you" (Rom. viii. 11). "Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?" (1 Cor. vi. 15.) It will thus be seen that the exhortation of the Apostle was not directed solely to the Thessalonian church; it was addressed to all the other churches over whose culture he pastorally presided. Whilst all this discipline was brought to bear upon the body, the Apostle fervently insisted that the asceticism which pretends to despise the body has no sanction in the revelation of God as given in Holy Scripture. "Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh" (Col. ii. 23). Thus a clear line of demarcation is drawn between the inordinate affection, or passion, and the worship which is due to so noble an instance of creative power as the body of man, in which the soul holds its high court. Up to a certain point pagan

and Christian are alike in physical constitution, and at that point the Christian separates from the pagan by so cultivating the spiritual as to hold the physical in abject servitude. All the callings of God are towards the higher life. We may test the divinity of our call by knowing whether it is a movement in the direction of holiness or in the direction of uncleanness. God never calls us downward to animalism, but ever upwards in a willing obedience to the sovereignty of the Holy Ghost. The Christian need have no difficulty whatever in ascertaining whether he is on the right road or the wrong. Any road that leads to mere indulgence, to base satisfactions, is by so much self-condemned; any call towards self-sacrifice, spiritual ambition, unselfish service, holier life, is at once self-certified.

Verses 9–12: "But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; and that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing."

You have been driven by circumstances to find comfort in one another. Because of outward temptations and trials you have been led to seek brotherhood within yourselves, and happily this brotherhood has resulted in a continual increase of Christian love. You have entered into the larger family. You now find your kinsfolk not amongst your blood relations, but amongst those who love the law of God, and draw their sustenance from the very fountain of the Cross. The lowest kinship is that which is of the flesh. A man may cease to be the brother of his own mother's son—nay, more, the time may come when by his growth of soul he becomes a stranger to the very mother who gave him birth. This should not be necessarily so. Happy is the condition which represents a true union both of body and soul; but if there is to be any separation from old associations, any severing of the dearest family ties, let the severing take place in obedience to the divine law of growth and consecration. "Whosoever shall do the will of My Father which is in heaven, the same is My brother, and sister, and

mother." There is a love which is void by generality. Such love is not indicated by the Apostle in this instance. He refers exclusively to the love of man to man because of the common love of a common Saviour.

A very simple duty is enjoined upon the Thessalonian Christians—namely, "That ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands." Quietness was set before the Thessalonians as a high ambition. Once they had been ambitious to make a figure amongst the churches. There is a ministry of quietness. It would seem as if the Apostle urged upon the Thessalonians to agitate for calmness. Peace was not to be a negative of force, but the last result and expression of a divinely inspired ambition. The whole church was to do its own business with quietness. As we have seen, the church is a unit as well as individuals. The Apostle would have his correspondents work with their own hands. Probably the most of them belonged to what we call the working classes; but now in another sense he would have them

work for peace, to organise for rest, to be ambitious to attain a high state of tranquillity. The Apostle had not overlooked the good results which would flow from honest working and walking towards "them that are without." Such working would be the best answer to heathen suspicion, and such working would be the best guarantee for the true wealth of the church itself. It is not enough to satisfy outward criticism; we are to remember that when we do good we are best ensuring our own security and best furthering, in an unselfish way, our own interests. Thus, again and again, Paul delivers, as from a Christian Sinai, Christian dogmas and commandments. "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth" (Eph. iv. 28). Thus not only did good working mean increase of property, but it meant the distribution of that property in generous and thoughtful beneficence. The apostles themselves did exactly what they commanded others to attempt. "I have shewed you all things, how that so

labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts xx. 35). Notwithstanding the mental independence and social dignity of the Apostle Paul and his fellow-apostles, they were always anxious that no just cause should be given for heathen criticism and accusation. "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without" (Col. iv. 5). "Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (2 Cor. viii. 21). "Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation" (1 Peter ii. 12).

Verses 13–18: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them that are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ

> shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

Thus suddenly does Paul change his point of view. It is an almost violent leap from the command quietly to do their own business to the grand declaration of the resurrection of believers in the name and power of Jesus Christ. The destiny of the Christian dead must always be a subject of enthralling interest to souls that have been bereaved. A beautiful image to represent death by sleep! In this instance, as in all other instances, the Apostle falls back upon a grand fundamental revelation, in this case the revelation being nothing less than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ Himself. If we would know the destiny of Christian sleepers, we have only to consider the course through which the Lord Jesus passed. He died and rose again. If Jesus Christ "died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him." We stand or fall in Jesus: "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that

slept" (1 Cor. xv. 20); "Knowing that He which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you" (2 Cor. iv. 14).

The coming of the Lord from heaven with all this demonstration described in verse 16 is no novel thought either with Christ of with the apostles. Jesus Christ Himself spoke definitely upon this very point: "They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. xxiv. 30, 31); "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Cor. xv. 52). Thus a grand common doctrine of the coming of Christ was proclaimed by Christ and His apostles. The church was not to perplex itself by asking curious questions as to mere method and detail. The church was to stand strong in a great principle, and to

leave God to work out His own methods. The trumpet of God is a great figure in Biblical history. In Zech. ix. 14 we read of the trumpet of God. In various other passages definite reference is made to the same instrument: "The Lord God shall blow the trumpet, and shall go with whirlwinds of the south" (Zech. ix. 14); "The great day of the Lord is near. . . . A day of the trumpet and alarm" (Zeph. i. 14, 16); "Thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war" (Jer. iv. 19). As far back as the delivery of the law on Sinai we hear of a trumpet: "There were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud" (Exod. xix. 16). And, coming to the Book of Revelation, chaps. viii. to xi., we are made familiar with the vision of the seven trumpets. We must be careful lest we too severely literalise the symbolism and imagery of the Bible. As we cannot do without the human personality in figuring to the imagination the personality of God, so we cannot do without crowns, and harps, and thrones, and crystal rivers, and waving palms, in picturing

the heavenly city. We must not drive the imagery too far; it has served its purpose when it has indicated to us the idea of rapture and triumph, security and blessedness. Wherefore, on the strength of these revelations of the coming Lord and the resurrection of Christian sleepers, be of good cheer and face the enemy with a front that cannot be abashed.

CHAPTER V

Verses 1–3: "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."

THE meaning is not that the Apostle could have given precise dates and hours if he had wished to do so. As to the details of the Lord's coming, Paul knew no more than others. What he did know was that a day of the Lord was coming, and coming as a thief in the night, and coming all the more surely and nearly as men deceived themselves by the assurance that it would not come. The Thessalonian Christians knew accurately that the day of the Lord was coming. So we know that the day of death is coming, so we know that the harvest is coming. The broad general fact is undis-

puted, but all the detail is concealed. To know perfectly is to know both exactly and certainly. The same word is translated "diligently" (Matt. ii. 8). It is also used in Luke i. 3, wherein Luke claims to having accurately traced all the things which he is about to narrate. The perfectness of the knowledge relates to the fact that the Lord has appointed a day upon which He will come, not to any detailed particulars as to the moment when the trumpet shall announce His advent. We are not to think of these arrangements as something out of the general course of providence. We have already traced the same principle in the coming of harvest and death. What does the coming of the day of the Lord mean? The first thought that occurs is the most narrow and literal—namely, that there will be a visible manifestation of our Lord's personality. This conception is almost painfully elementary; the conception is bare and common and utterly prosaic. We have to outlive that conception before we can come into the inmost sanctuary of the divine epiphany. We no longer look for an incarnation. When our Lord came

back from the tomb He did not come with the flesh in which he tabernacled before the crucifixion. The resurrection was of a kind of second advent. His own disciples did not know Christ when He returned and communed with them; Mary did not know the Lord when she saw Him in the garden. Yet surely the Lord had come, and Mary knew it when He recalled the familiar tone. So the Lord may be coming day by day, in deeper conviction, in tenderer sympathy, in richer solace, and in broader visions of the sky of spiritual truth. We must not suppose that the Lord has not come simply because we have not seen Him. The sun does not bring the landscape; the sun reveals it. So the Lord is revealed to the spirit of man, and the spirit of man has no doubt of the reality of the revelation; no more doubt than the spirit has of its own existence. This is the only coming of the Lord which the whole scope of Scripture would seem to reveal. The Lord comes in judgment. The Lord comes in the whole action of daily providence. Day by day the righteous go into life eternal, and day by day the

wicked are driven off into everlasting punishment—into shame and contempt and forgetfulness. There is a tendency to consider that monotony is an aspect of permanence. Hence unwise or wicked men constantly ask, "Where is the promise of His coming, for since the fathers fell asleep all things continue as they were?" To the mind of man a century is a long time—a thousand years is an eternity! To the mind of God there are no such figures, relations, or proportions. God does not count by our unit, large or small, but by His own purpose, which stretches from everlasting to everlasting. Expect Christ with every sunrise; see Him in every evening star.

> Verses 4, 5: "But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness."

Christians are children of light, which is more than a figure of speech. Christians have a wide and clear outlook upon divine purposes. They are so full of light that it is difficult for error to make any impression

upon them. If we Christians will only be faithful to whatever light they have, their faithfulness is a guarantee that their light shall increase more and more unto perfect day. There are men who love darkness rather than light. They are not in a condition to receive a divine revelation. They are not in darkness as a mere fact; they are in darkness by their own special election and determination. They love darkness. When a man loves a prejudice it is almost impossible to liberate him from its bondage. He has not an open mind. His heart lives within impenetrable barriers. It is not so with the children of the day. They have the open mind, the sensitive appreciation, the truth-loving soul. Light gives courage; night fills the soul with fear. The Apostle says that Christians are not the property of Night. He speaks figuratively; he represents Night as a proprietor or gaoler, and he boldly says that we are not in the custody of Night, but are the freemen of the broad daylight. Darkness has its wicked charms, but they are dispelled and destroyed by the first look of morning glory.

Verses 6–8: "Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation."

Then let Christians know that the time of sleep should be limited, and that slumber should be jealously watched lest it become the foe of the soul. Sudden destruction comes upon the sleepers, and inevitable ruin follows indifference to the culture of the soul. It becomes Christians, therefore, to be sober, in order that they may watch. We have to rouse ourselves not only from sleep, but from intoxication. As a matter of literal sequence, "sober" should come before "watch," for we can only watch in the degree in which we are sober. "Be thou sober" is the literal rendering of "watch thou" (2 Tim. iv. 5). "Be ye therefore (literally) of sound mind, and watch" (1 Peter iv. 7). "Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you

unawares. . . . Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man" (Luke xxi. 34, 36). Mark the sharp distinction which the Apostle always draws between children of the night and children of the day. They cannot be confused one with the other. The Apostle speaks nothing about twilight, or about the grading of one degree of light or darkness into another—he recognises only night and day, and we must belong to, or represent, one or other of these portions of time. Let drunken people hide their drunkenness within the gloom of night. Drunkenness is a process, and drunkenness is also a realised state. The Apostle regards drunkenness in both aspects. "Become not drunk with wine" is the literal form of what is said in Eph. v. 18. Have nothing to do with the beginning of drunkenness. The way down to the state of drunkenness is an inclined plane—the first step necessitates the last.

The Apostle now represents the Christian attitude under a strong figure. Sober men

are to put on the breastplate of faith and love; and their heads are to be protected by the hope of salvation as by a helmet. When the Apostle says "putting on," he must be understood as having said "having put on"—the act is represented as complete and final, an act of which there is to be no undoing. We are to put on Jesus. This corruptible is to put on incorruption. We have to put on Christ. We have to put on the new man. We have to "Put on . . . bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering" (Col. iii. 12). The figure of military investiture is very striking: "Let us put on the armour of light" (Rom. xiii. 12); "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. . . . Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness" (Eph. vi. 11, 13, 14). A still more wonderful figure is given in Isa. lix. 17, where God Himself is repre-

sented as having put on righteousness as a breastplate, and salvation as a helmet upon His head. However various the uses which Paul makes of the same figure, he makes no change in the great instruction that we are to be protected by a panoply of God's own making. Whether faith and hope be the breastplate, or whether righteousness is to be the chain-mail protecting the chest and back, the grand spiritual meaning is the same. To raise a controversy as to the literal application of these figures is to be frivolous and to lose the intended instruction.

> Verses 9–11: "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."

"The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." Even so God has not appointed men to destruction nor to wrath. The wrath of God has never been concealed—from the very beginning it has been declared as one of the great ministers of providence. "In the day that thou

eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." We are familiar with the word "wrath" in the New Testament: "Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. i. 18). "Because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience" (Eph. v. 6). "Hide us from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of His wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" (Rev. vi. 16, 17.) From such passages it will be clearly seen that the "wrath of God" has never been kept in the background, or reserved as a painful surprise.

The Apostle is not content by declaring that Christians are not appointed to wrath—he proceeds to represent a positive aspect of the case, namely, that Christians are appointed to obtain salvation—that is, to acquire it and possess it, as a right conferred by grace. "Salvation" is one of the largest words in all Christian experience. It is not only salvation from sin, but salvation from ignorance, error, intellectual and spiritual bondage, and all the

narrowness which would limit and misrepresent the grace of God. Jesus Christ purchased or acquired the Church of God with His own blood. The servants of the Lord are to purchase or acquire to themselves a good degree. The negative aspect of the experience is graphically put in 2 Chron. xiii. 14. The Ethiopians were overthrown, so that they could not recover themselves, because there was in them no saving, or preservation. The people of God are "a peculiar people"—that is to say, they are an acquired people, a possession established and secured by the power of grace. That the Lord meant salvation in the fullest and grandest sense of the term is made clear by the fact that it was acquired and made possible "by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us." Those who are saved by the death of Christ will be glorified by the life of Christ. Our vital union with Christ is not affected either by life or by death. Being in Christ, our life is immortality, and our so-called death is but a step through the darkness into the light. Beautiful beyond all conception is the simple phrase, "We should live together with

Him." "Because I live, ye shall live also" (John xiv. 19). "Your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory" (Col. iii. 3, 4). What is the natural application of these grand assurances? The great practical issue is that those who accept the assurances as valid are to comfort themselves together, and to build one another up in their most holy faith. The literal meaning of edification is to build up little by little, stone by stone, but to have from the very beginning an idea of the plan of the temple life. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God?" (1 Cor. iii. 16.) "Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?" (1 Cor. vi. 19.) The word "edify" is used graphically in Acts ix. 31. Then had the churches rest, or peace, and were edified, or gradually built up stone by stone. In 1 Peter ii. 4, 5 the metaphor is most vividly carried out—"To whom coming, as unto a living stone, . . . ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house." The metaphor is common in the apostolic writings; thus Eph. ii. 20–22—"Built upon the foundation

of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." The Apostle as a tactful minister of Christ fully recognised that the Thessalonian Christians had already begun this practical and holy work of edification—"even as also ye do." Men who are struggling with any great effort should have all their service gratefully and strongly recognised.

> Verses 12, 13: "And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves."

The Apostle was the friend of Christian ministers. He never sought any special glory for himself; he always sought a common appreciation for the whole ministry. He would have hearers clearly understand that they were debtors to those who lavish spiritual benefactions amongst them. "Therefore acknowledge ye them that are such"

(1 Cor. xvi. 18). "As also ye have acknowledged us in part, that we are your rejoicing" (2 Cor. i. 14). "Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation" (Phil. ii. 29). Appreciation is not flattery. Appreciation on the part of the hearer is turned into inspiration on the part of the teacher. The husbandman would be severely discouraged if he did not see first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. In Phil. ii. 16 the Apostle desires to have the satisfaction of knowing "that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain." The Apostle describes ministers as "over you in the Lord." This does not mean arbitrary rulership, or merely official superiority; it suggests a pastoral but deeply responsible relation. Pastors are not to lord it over God's heritage, but are to run in a common race, to fight in a common battle, and to create a spirit of family unity and household interdependence. Ministers are recognised by the Apostle as admonishing the Church—that is, warning, reminding, and advising the Church. The ministry is to work for our admonition

(1 Cor. x. 11, Eph. vi. 4). That ministers have to do their work tenderly and sympathetically, rather than mechanically and officially, is made clear by the exhortation, "Esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake." Admonition is not mere censure; it may be entreaty, and may express the solicitude of an anxious heart. Ministers are to be esteemed "very highly"—that is to say, beyond, or more than is usual. The love is to be an exceeding love. The particular word which the Apostle uses occurs only in this place. An adverbial use of the word is, however, found in such verses as, "Night and day praying exceedingly" (1 Thess. iii. 10); and again, "Exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. iii. 20). Note that ministers are to be loved very highly, not on their own personal account, but "for their work's sake." Happily, it is possible for the man to be so filled with the spirit of his work that on his own account he may acquire the truest love of his people. Every man is to prove his election of God by his work. Happy is the man who can illustrate his doctrine by his service. "Let

your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." Every man is to prove his own work (Gal. vi. 4). A woful day will it be for the Church when ministers are esteemed only on account of their official position and robes. A curious exhortation occurs in this connection—"Be at peace among yourselves." "Be at peace" is one word in the original. The term is of frequent occurrence in both the Old Testament and the New: "The land had rest"; "The realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet: for his God gave him rest round about" (2 Chron. xx. 30); "The beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee. And thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace" (Job v. 23, 24); "Have peace one with another" (Mark ix. 50); "Live peaceably with all men" (Rom. xii. 18). The Thessalonian Christians were not to set ministers in rivalry one against another; all the ministers were to be esteemed very highly in love for their work's sake, and the spirit of sectarianism or partiality was to be shunned as a spiritual evil. Men who have

learned the secret of obedience have already entered into the reward of peace.

> Verses 14–16: "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. Rejoice evermore."

The Apostle seems to leave the whole congregation for a moment, and to address himself specially to those who exercise the office of the ministry. There is nothing here to exclude the idea of mutual exhortation and warning, but the probability is that the injunction was addressed specifically to the elders, ministerial or otherwise, of the Thessalonian church. A wonderful variety of method is represented in the whole idea of the Christian ministry—exhort, warn, comfort, support, be patient. So, then, a call to the ministry is a call to watchfulness, to discernment, to the fair and honest treatment of case after case as it may arise. It is recognised that even members of the church may be unruly or disorderly. "That walketh disorderly" (2 Thess. iii. 6). "We behaved

not ourselves disorderly among you" (2 Thess. iii. 7). To comfort is to encourage, to rouse, to animate, to call up the whole man to his fullest strength. Many in the church may be feebleminded. Curiously, this word is not used elsewhere in the New Testament, but it is of repeated occurrence in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not" (Isa. xxxv. 4). To revive the spirit of the humble, giving patience to the feebleminded. To support a soul is to make it strong where it is weak, or to protect it where it is threatened. "Will hold to the one" (Luke xvi. 13). "Holding fast the faithful word" (Titus i. 9). "Forsake not wisdom, and she shall preserve thee"—or hold to thee, or give thee strength as a buttress (Prov. iv. 6). "He that putteth his trust in Me shall possess the land" (Isa. lvii. 13). The weak are to be supported. The weak must be made to realise their own weakness. Weakness is intolerable when it supposes itself to be strength. "His bodily presence is weak" (2 Cor. x. 10). "How that so labouring ye ought to support

the weak" (Acts xx. 35). Sometimes a man is weak in faith, almost diseased in soul. He that is weak in faith is to be received (Rom. xiv. 1). Do not depress the weak by an unnecessary display of rude power, but rather accommodate yourself to those who are infirm, and to those who are in bondage. "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak" (1 Cor. ix. 22). "Who is weak, and I am not weak?" (2 Cor. xi. 29.) Patience means longsuffering, long forbearance, hopeful waiting. The Lord Himself is represented as "merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Exod. xxxiv. 6). "Charity suffereth long" (1 Cor. xiii. 4). "With longsuffering, forbearing one another in love" (Eph. iv. 2). Be very careful not to retaliate or to render evil for evil unto any man. Watch human nature at every point. We are all called to watchfulness. The favourite word is "Take heed" (Mark viii. 15, Luke xii. 15). Do not throw back insults. Remember your Master, and recompense to no man evil for evil (Rom. xii. 17). We are not under the dominion of an evil

spirit; we are guided and sustained by the spirit of forbearance, and love, and patience. We are to pursue that which is good. The idea is that a figure or personality is running away from us, and we are called upon to endeavour by swiftness of speed to overtake that which is escaping, and having overtaken it, we are to hold it in loving custody. "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace" (Rom. xiv. 19). "Follow after charity" (1 Cor. xiv. 1)—that is, pursue it, run after it, whether it is going up hill or down dale; never give up the sacred chase. "Follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness" (1 Tim. vi. 11).

Verse 17: "Pray without ceasing."

This doctrine is laid down in the Gospel of Luke (xviii. 1), "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint." This is not the only instance in which Paul inculcates the same doctrine. "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (Eph. vi. 18).

We are not to look upon the words "without ceasing" as indicating a formal attitude, or a merely literal habit. We are to encourage the spirit of prayer. It should never be difficult for us to come boldly to the throne of grace. The act of prayer is one thing; the disposition or desire to pray is another. We are not every moment, literally without intermission, thinking of the friend who is dearest to our soul, yet in less than the twinkling of an eye we can realise the presence of that soul, and cover it with every token of reverence and love. The Apostle frequently used the words "without ceasing." He has used them already in this Epistle (i. 3): "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father." "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing" (ii. 13). The same word is used by the same Apostle in the Epistle to the Romans (i. 9): "God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers." Words always bring

with them their natural limitations. There are implied adjectives or terms of limitation connected with every principal word we use. All promises are conditional. All pledges, vows, and purposes regarding the future are based upon certain implications, whether expressed or suppressed. The apostles lived in prayer. Not only did they live in their own, but they fervently solicited the prayers of others that a kind of spiritual atmosphere might surround their whole life and thought. The apostolic spirit was bathed in the stream of prayer. Words are not always necessary to prayer—prayer may be breathed in silence, or expressed in sighs, or pictured in upward or expectant looks. It is a spiritual loss to the soul always to be tormenting itself about literal obedience. In this case, as in all others, the letter killeth, the spirit maketh alive.

Verse 18: "In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

There is ample precedent for the practice of thanksgiving. "He took bread, and gave thanks to God in presence of them all: and when he had broken it, he began to eat"

(Acts xxvii. 35). "Whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage" (Acts xxviii. 15). "That for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf" (2 Cor. i. 11). "Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. v. 20). The Apostle says that the giving of thanks is one expression of the will of God—that is to say, thanksgiving is one of the ways in which we express the will of God. Sometimes the article "the" does not so clearly explain the meaning of the Apostle as the article "a." For example, in this text we might read, "This is a will of God"—one of the wills, one of the methods of expressing the whole will, a drop in the great stream of the divine volition and sovereign action. We read in Col. iv. 12, "That ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God"—that is to say, in every will of God, in each will of God, in every particular thought of God concerning the redemption and sanctification of the soul. The whole of the divine will is "in Christ

Jesus." Whatever God does He does in the name of Jesus Christ, or for the sake of Jesus Christ, or that He may bring the soul into closer relation to Jesus Christ. God will not have what we are pleased to call, in our learned ignorance, "Theism." God works mediatorially—that is to say, through His Son, who is our High Priest, and who ever liveth to make intercession for us. "There is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus."

Verse 19: "Quench not the Spirit."

The Spirit is represented as a burning or blazing fire, and Christians are commanded not to throw quenching water upon the holy conflagration. When the foolish virgins complained that their lamps were going out, the more literal reading would be, "our lamps are being quenched." We know what it is to quench natural enthusiasm, to suppress or rebuke our most eager desires, to limit the action of our most ardent affections. We are not to limit the Holy One of Israel, nor are we to rebuke the expression of peculiar gifts and movements in the soul of the believer.

We are not to throw cold water upon the burning bush simply because other bushes are not burning. God has always made special use of peculiar individualism, sometimes known as genius, sometimes known as eccentricity, sometimes known even as madness. The Holy Ghost will work within a man according to a man's individuality of temperament or capacity. The Apostle Paul did not rebuke the use of "tongues" in the church at Corinth. It is true that he used the language of caution in reference to such "tongues," but he was quite prepared to believe that in this eccentric way the Holy Spirit might be speaking to the church under special conditions. Christianity showed how open it was to the interpretation of large and vigorous minds, as in the case of the Apostle Paul. The Apostle not only said, "Quench not the Spirit"—in Eph. iv. 30 he warns his readers not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews declares it wilful sin to offer "despite unto the Spirit of grace" (Heb. x. 29). The Apostle does not confine himself to negative instruction on this matter of the action of the

Holy Ghost; he only uses the negative in order that he may make the positive more definite and binding. Quench not, grieve not, despise not—these are not enough. In his Second Epistle to Timothy, i. 6, the Apostle gives the positive instruction, "I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God which is in thee." In 1 Cor. xii. 7 the Apostle says, "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal." It is not enough to have the Spirit as an individual and secret possession; that Spirit must make a way for itself out of the heart and the understanding and the will into the speech and conduct and whole discipline of life. The Apostle Paul never grieved or quenched the Spirit. He felt that the Spirit was essential to the authority and efficiency of his apostleship. "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Cor. ii. 4, 5). Believers themselves were to be expressions of a grand spiritual ministry: "Ye are manifestly de-

clared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God" (2 Cor. iii. 3).

Verse 20: "Despise not prophesyings."

If we cultivate the ministry of the Holy Ghost in our own souls, we shall be prepared to recognise that ministry in the souls of others. There is a divine distribution of gifts which all who believe in Jesus Christ must gratefully recognise: "For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: but all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will" (1 Cor. xii. 8–11). The Apostle Paul declares that in "other ages" the mystery of the Gospel, or the mystery of Christ, was not made known unto the sons of men as it is now revealed unto the

holy prophets and apostles by the Spirit. Christians live under the dispensation of the Holy Ghost, and should make themselves known by the light and warmth of pentecostal fire. We do not worship a visible Saviour; we worship a Saviour made visible to the soul by the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit unites and consolidates the Church—"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor. xii. 13). Under the reign of the Holy Ghost "the flesh profiteth nothing" (John vi. 63). We have passed the school of the flesh and are now under the tuition, enlightenment, and sovereignty of the Spirit. Nothing is so easy as to despise other men—hence the point of the apostolic exhortation. Never discourage the prophets of the Church, nor undervalue inspired preaching, nor degrade spiritual enthusiasm into regulated commonplace.

Verse 21: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

Test all things; never receive anything

on mere credit. Always remember that many false Christs have gone out into the world. "Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God." Having proved your conclusions, hold them, and hold them fast. You are not to believe in enthusiasm simply because of its passion, but you are to believe in its passion because its purpose is beneficent, elevating, and sanctifying. Always distinguish between enthusiasm and mere emotion. The foam upon the wave is not the wave itself. The figure of holding fast is not unknown in the apostolic writings: "Having heard the word, keep it" (Luke viii. 15). Hold it fast, take hold of it with both hands, beware of any loose handling of divine things. In 1 Cor. xv. 2 the Apostle says, "By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory"—literally, if you cling to, hold fast, determinately claim and insist upon—"what I preached unto you." The writer to the Hebrews says (iii. 14; x. 23), "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering." Hold fast that which is good, that which is lovely, honourable, and of good report. We are to cling to that which is

honest. We are to hold fast our well-doing and well-wishing, and never be weary in this constancy of attachment to things divine.

Verse 22: "Abstain from all appearance of evil."

Evil is represented in some cases as a bodily presence, or fashion, or outline of personality. We are not only to abstain from evil deeds, but from every deed that has the appearance of evil. This is a critical distinction, and must be well known to the heart which is thoroughly trained in Christian study and conduct. In this matter we are to consider public criticism, and even public ignorance and prejudice. The Apostle Paul would not eat or drink certain things if by doing so he would grieve or offend one of the weakest of the believers.

Verses 23, 24: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it."

For the use of the expression the "God of peace" see the following passages: "The God

of peace be with you all" (Rom. xv. 33); "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly" (Rom. xvi. 20); "The God of love and peace shall be with you" (2 Cor. xiii. 11); "The God of peace shall be with you" (Phil. iv. 9).

The God of peace is to sanctify those in whom He dwells, wholly, entirely, carrying out the process to fullest accomplishment and coronation. The whole man—spirit, soul, body—is to be penetrated by the divine energy and subdued by the divine Spirit. In this passage only is the threefold division of a Christian man fully or literally expressed. But that threefold division is implied in many passages. When the Apostle refers to the spirit and the soul, the body is, of course, recognised, because man is obviously more than spirit and soul. "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." It is the body that speaks, and therefore the trinity of parts is fully recognised and represented. We often break up ourselves, so to say, into conscience, reason, imagination, memory,

will, and the like. We speak of our heart and soul. We describe ourselves as flesh and spirit. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John iii. 6). "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you" (Rom. viii. 9). The word "spirit" is not unknown to the Old Testament. "There is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding" (Job xxxii. 8). In the fifty-first Psalm and the tenth verse the Psalmist prays, "Renew a right spirit within me." Even the pessimist worldling—often supposed to make no recognition of what we know as the immortal life—declares in Ecclesiastes xii. 7, "The spirit shall return unto God who gave it." In the New Testament a broad distinction is always drawn between the natural man and the spiritual man. The spiritual man is under the dominion of the spirit; he does not sow to the flesh; his heart is in continual quest of God. The Apostle presents a most comprehensive prayer on behalf of the Thessalonians. In effect

he says, "God keep you in every part, aspect, jot, tittle, of your compound nature; may the full sunshine of His blessing fall upon your total manhood, so that every faculty, power, wish, purpose, affection, may be completely satisfied; and may your very body be as highly spiritualised as possible—nay, may it be turned into a very temple and instrument of the Holy Ghost!" The Apostle uses the word "preserved," which is the very word used by Jesus Christ in His great intercessory prayer, though not rendered such in English: "Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given me" (keep or preserve). . . . "I kept them in Thy name" (in Thy name I preserved them). . . . "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil" (preserve them from the evil) (John xvii. 11, 12, 15). Jude says that Christians are "preserved in Jesus Christ." The same word is used in the letter to the angel of the church in Philadelphia: "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee" (preserve thee) "from the

hour of temptation." Constantly the Apostle sets before the Thessalonian Christians "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." We are to set before our minds and our aspirations the same grand ideal of completion. The sphere of human education and trial has to be rounded off. No barren spot has to be left in all the nature. We must work as if we expected the Lord daily, and prepare our hearts as a house is prepared for the reception of a great guest. Underneath all this exhortation lies the comforting promise, "Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it." The Christian soul does not go on a warfare at his own expense. If the believer is to "work out his own salvation with fear and trembling," he is to remember for his encouragement that it is God that "worketh in him." The divine promise is at stake; the divine oath is on its trial. Reverently we may say that we are called upon so to live that if there be any final failure it shall not be on our part. We are summoned to put the divine faithfulness to the test. What a bouquet of choice flowers might be made of the

Scriptures which insist upon the faithfulness of God in the keeping of His promises and the preservation of His people! "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. i. 9). "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able" (1 Cor. x. 13). "The Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil" (2 Thess. iii. 3). "She judged Him faithful who had promised" (Heb. xi. 11). We ourselves cannot faithlessly live on the faithfulness of God. Only faithfulness can appreciate faithfulness. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. ii. 10); "We are saved by faith" (Eph. ii. 8); "Thou standest by faith" (Rom. xi. 20). If God "will do it," we also must "do it." God's words are God's deeds. With God promise is performance.

> Verses 25-27: "Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss. I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren."

Here again the apostles joined the common life and the common experience of the

church. They do not set themselves up as above the necessity of sympathetic prayer. The apostles would live in the prayers of the people. "Ye also helping together by prayer for us" (2 Cor. i. 11). "I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer" (Phil. i. 19). "I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me" (Rom. xv. 30). "I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you" (Philem. 22). There can be no doubt that the apostles believed not only in the soul praying for itself, but in the soul being prayed for by the earnest love of other souls. Nor can there be any doubt that the apostles vitally allied themselves with the common life and service and joy of the church. "Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, . . . who hath also sealed us. . . . Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy" (2 Cor. i. 21, 22, 24).

"Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss."

So it is commanded in Romans xvi. 16; in 1 Cor. xvi. 20; in 2 Cor. xiii. 12; in 1 Peter v. 14. To purity the loving kiss is a seal. Heart may kiss heart in pledge of brotherhood and spiritual affinity of every degree.

The apostles insist upon having the Epistle read to the congregation. "I charge you," literally, "I adjure you." The apostles made no secret communications to the heads, or representatives, of the congregation. The Gospel is for all. The Scriptures are to be read in the hearing of all the people, for all the provisions and promises of God are meant for the common enjoyment of the household of faith.

Then comes the great benediction: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." Either at the beginning or at the end of his letters Paul availed himself of practically the same form of benediction. Sometimes the formula was contracted; sometimes it was expanded, as if in an intenser glow of love, thus: "The grace of the Lord Jesus

Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all" (2 Cor. xiii. 14). Sometimes it is simply, "Grace be with you"; at other times it is the invocation of the whole Trinity, that the church receiving the Gospel may be enriched and blessed, daily comforted and continually inspired.

THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS

PRAYER BEFORE PERUSAL

O Thou, who hast redeemed Thy Church with the precious blood of Jesus Christ, Thy Son, we bless Thee for the mighty men who have led Thy hosts in the day of battle and grievous distress. We thank Thee for all the epistles of love which such men wrote to churches who were bowed down with great sorrow, and whose own help had utterly gone out of their sinking hearts. We thank Thee for the noble apostles and leaders who kept the torch of truth burning when the wind of opposition had grown into a furious storm. Our hearts are filled with joy when we think of the men who endured fiery trials, and came out of the furnace singing a new song, and lifting to the sun banners of victory. Thou hast led Thy Church through many a wilderness, and brought her, according to Thy purpose of grace, to the green and luxuriant Canaan of Thy eternal love. Thou hast never suffered Thy Church to be tempted above that she was able to bear, but with every temptation Thou hast found a way of escape. We thank Thee for heroic hearts. We bless Thee for lives that have never given room to the enemy, no, not for a single hour. May we follow those who, by faith and patience, have followed the

Lamb through all the way of the wilderness, and up all the high hills of frowning difficulty! We bless Thee for the expectations which have kept our hope alive; we specially thank Thee for the expectation of our Lord's coming, whether personally in all radiant visibleness, or whether providentially in all the changing relations and aspects of life, whether in the hidden sanctuary of the soul or in the outward temple of daily providence. Lord Jesus, come quickly! Our sins are many, but Thy grace outweighs them all! Come quickly, for our hearts are aching and are yearning to cling to Thee as their only hope and strength. The Lord be with us in reading this letter of love from the greatest of the apostles; open our eyes that we may see wondrous things in this expression of the heart, and may the benediction which the Apostle prayed to rest upon the Thessalonians rest abundantly upon ourselves in the valley of darkness and in the furnace of greatest trial! Amen.

INTRODUCTION

YOUR hearts are no doubt longing to hear from us and to receive some word of comfort in the midst of all your terrible sufferings. Never forget that you are a church of God, because the Son of God dwells in your midst and fills you with all the precious tenderness of His love. Grace to you, the whole favour of God, and peace, the infinite tranquillity of your Father and your Saviour, be unto you day by day, a treasure in the heavens which can neither be corrupted nor stolen.

Our whole heart goes out in overflowing thanks to God when we think of you—and we think of you always, for if we ceased to think of you we

should lose one of our chief joys. We thank God for you as for a spiritual miracle, for we are assured that your faith grows out of all bounds, like a vine rising to the height of the wall and falling down in great wreaths of beauty and fruitfulness. We can compare you to nothing else—your faith groweth like a luxuriant plant, and your love to one another abounds as if well should be added to well until the gathered waters flow like a river between banks of luxuriant herbage. You are an amazement unto us, the continual subject of our conversation; we speak of you to all the churches of God. Your patience and your faith are great beyond all expectation, and this is the more wonderful that you are constantly undergoing severe persecutions and most distressing afflictions. You must wonder at the discipline through which God brings you; you magnify the love of God by your very patience, for nothing but the love of God could enable you

to endure such distresses and to hold on in your course of faith. If ever men had reason to give up the Gospel, and yield themselves to social seductions in order to escape the terrible persecutions of ungodly men, you might fairly give way before the pressure, and take what you may be able to secure of worldly ease. It is our heart's delight to think that you have a clear discernment of the wonderful purpose of God in all the laceration to which He has permitted you to be subjected; you see that He is preparing you to be counted worthy of His own kingdom, and you wisely leave the recompense to your tormentors in His almighty hands. We know what it is which gives you comfort in the burning furnace. You have felt, as it were, the whole agony of affliction. What comforted you during that all but unbearable agony? It was that you expected the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven; your faith was so great that

you almost saw the outline of His figure in the flaming heaven. The simple explanation of all your heroic endurance is that you are expecting to see Jesus Christ, who shall be the wonder of His people and their almighty and eternal Deliverer. This expectation sustains the faith and the hope of all Christian believers. You are not arbitrarily fixing God to this or that mode of rendering Himself visible; you are simply resting in full assurance that God will realise His good-will in your experience, and you are prepared that the divine will should be realised according to the divine purpose. What you really want—and it is the supreme joy of our heart to say so—is that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, your desire being also that you shall be glorified in Him according to the infinite measure of the divine grace. We congratulate you on this spiritual experience, and we thank God that He has so far

completed the miracle of His grace in the transformation and renewal of your soul's loveliest image.

You need some teaching in behalf of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; that coming shall be a presence, a living face, a glowing personality. What you have to do is to leave the whole method in the divine hands. Simply say "Thy kingdom come," and leave all the details of the process to the wisdom of God. You are naturally so sensitive about this expectation as to make it possible that you may be troubled by an epistle from ourselves about the working out of this lofty expectation. Be very careful lest in your spiritual sensitiveness you grieve the Spirit or even quench the Spirit. False teachers are surrounding you, hoping to make some profit out of the evolution of your faith and experience; we beseech you not to let any man beguile you, but to retire into the inmost sanctuary of the divine presence

and say to your Father in heaven, "Thy will be done."

As to the way in which the Lord will come, we may remind you that the Lord Himself always treated His own coming as a secret which He Himself could not reveal. That coming was known only to the Eternal Father. Of one thing we are strongly confident, that Jesus Christ will not come in the truest or most obvious sense except there come first a great falling away from the Cross of Christ. The spirit of lawlessness will seem to prevail over the spirit of order: the man of sin, the son of perdition, will try to expel God from His own throne and make himself the supreme object of adoration and obedience. There will be a terrible apostasy. I dwelt upon this subject when I was amongst you, and the more I think of it the more important it seems to be as an indication of time and circumstances. You may even expect the throwing

down of everything that is orderly, and you may fully expect also the incoming of a great flood of lawlessness. Satan is to be rampant for a time—for a time, indeed, he will be clothed with power and signs and lying wonders, and it will appear as if God Himself had been driven out of His own Church. Do not allow yourselves to be overwhelmed by such circumstances, for it is God Himself that is controlling the whole action and making His purposes of providence more and more manifest. I do not hesitate to say that it is God Himself who is sending a strong delusion upon certain people that they should believe a lie. If you study the prophets of the Old Testament, you will find that now and again God has confused the nations, and in a certain sense has permitted them to accept a lie as if it were a revelation of Himself. We fully admit that the circumstances are full of confusion, and that they could be so used as to create and

deepen the impression that there is nothing either true or secure under heaven. This is the trial of faith; everything depends upon how faith deports itself under such conditions. Stand fast in the Lord and in the power of His might, knowing that Satan is chained and that his time is fixed, that the end of his kingdom hastens with every pulse of your heart.

Do not suppose that we are overborne by fear on your account. We give thanks to God alway for you, brethren, beloved of the Lord, because we are more and more sure that from the beginning God purposed your salvation and sanctification, and that He has been working all the time for the establishment of your belief of the truth. We have a peculiarly strong conviction about you. We believe that you are specially chosen of God for the illustration of some of the deepest spiritual truths; so we say

again—stand fast, lay a strong hand upon all the doctrines which you have already received, when we were with you in the body, and when we wrote to you our epistle.

God be with you. Remember that Jesus Christ loved you and gave Himself for you. Let this be the eternal comfort of your souls, expressing itself in a good hope through grace, and stablishing you in every good word and work. Do not give way to verbal speculation or entangle yourselves in wordy disputes, but keep on steadily and hopefully, working in every possible service, for work is the best corrective of speculation and the best discipline of mere fancy.

As we thus desire heavenly blessings for you, so we would call you to a ministry of prayer on our own behalf. We are in no doubt or uncertainty as to our faith and purpose, but we are weak—we are subject to the great

common temptation. In addition to this, we are exposed to some of the hottest darts of the devil; therefore, brethren, think of us in prayer and especially supplicate Almighty God that His word may run and be glorified even as it is within your own boundaries as a church elect of God. One of our immediate difficulties arises from the conduct of unreasonable and base-minded men. They have no pity, no sense of justice, no respect for human feeling. Even when they do not persecute us, they beseech us with unreasonable and impossible requests. We need to be prayed for. Have us frequently in the thought of your heart, and when you have special access to the Father through the Son think of us and pray God to send a blessing upon our ministry. You hardly know what real faith and trust we have in you, and about you. We are sure that you will eagerly examine every word which we write to you and will do

your very utmost to fulfil our command. We speak in the name of the Lord. If we spoke in our own name, we should speak hesitantly, but because we speak in the name Eternal hesitation gives place to confidence and emphasis.

You will find more and more your need of obeying most scrupulously the whole discipline of Christ. If any man amongst you walks in a disorderly fashion, having invented some scheme of his own, or given himself up to some fanciful theory, or loosened himself from the severest bonds of law and order, avoid that man. It is easy always to do mischief; it is always difficult to be virtuous and obedient: therefore, avoid all influences that would tend to relax discipline, or to reduce the spirit of order to a minor position. Be followers of us. We behaved not ourselves disorderly amongst you; you know that we worked as honest men, and did not

accept any merely sentimental charity. We worked very hard when we were with you—and, indeed, we have worked very hard throughout our whole apostolic course; we were scrupulously anxious not to be a burden to any man amongst us. We have always been particular on this matter of discipline and self-help. We have never encouraged idleness; we have never invited the idle man to partake of our loaf or cup. It is not all good news that we have heard about you; we have even heard that some people whom you know only too well have given up working altogether, and are spending their time as busybodies. This kind of dissipation must be ended. We command and exhort by the Lord Jesus Christ that with quietness men should work and eat their own bread. Daily toil is good for the soul; idleness always tends to moral laxity. Observe, brethren beloved, that we are doing something more than offering merely kindly advice—we are laying

down the commandment of God; and in the Spirit of Jesus Christ we command that you have no company with any man that is idle, dissipated, or lax in discipline. We do not wish you to drive this man away into outer darkness; we wish you to admonish him, and to address particularly and lovingly anything in him that may betoken brotherliness or desire to do right. Reckless judgments are worthless. Do not create enemies and then expel them. Hope the very best of every man that is in your society, and try to recover him even if you have to resort to austere means in breaking down his perversity. The Lord of peace bless you at all times and in all ways. May every day be Sabbath day in your soul's history! May you be able to retire from the crowd, and the noise, and the distraction of daily life, and find a corner in the sanctuary where you can commune with the spirit of peace and with the spirit of love!

Here is my signature. Look upon this writing as a token. My autograph is my heart. I salute every one of you with a holy kiss. Brethren, farewell. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

PRAYER BEFORE PERUSAL

Almighty God, though Thou dwellest in heaven, yet art Thou near unto every one who calls upon Thee with the desire of love, and unto every one in whose eyes are the tears of penitence. Thou dost, indeed, inhabit eternity and the praises thereof; yet dost Thou come unto the broken heart and the contrite spirit, making heaven there, in answer to the cry of human pain, under a sense of the terribleness of sin. Thou art the God that hears and answers prayer. Our fathers have said so; we ourselves have known it by blessed experience. So do we continue our supplications unto Thy throne, even until Thou dost open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing, until every channel and vessel of life be filled to overflowing. We confess our sins; we seek Thy pardon. We have done the things we ought not to have done; but Jesus Christ Thy Son was delivered for our offences, and raised again for our justification. We trust in the living Saviour, who is the living God. We rest our sins on Jesus; we bring our guilt to His great cross; we lay our hand upon the sacrifice which He presented; we behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. As we look upon Him with the eyes of

our faith and our love, Thou dost say unto each of us, "Thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven thee." Help us to worship sincerely and profitably in this hour. May we see Thee in Thy truth; feel Thee, not only in Thy works, but in the warmth and comfort of our own hearts, as men who, having known the bitterness of sin, are now permitted to know the saving grace of the living God! Make us sober; excite great expectations in our heart, and satisfy those expectations with a great rain of blessing. Hear our prayer. Have mercy upon us. Renew our strength and our hope. Enable us to worship, in service, in suffering, to glorify God, in whom alone we live and move and have our being. Amen.

CHAPTER I

Verse 1: "Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

WE do not know now the value of a letter, because every morning brings its post, and we are in constant communication with our dearest friends. Consider what it was in apostolic times to receive a letter! Consider how precious it must have been to such a struggling band of tried disciples as constituted the church at Thessalonica.

Mark how wonderfully, through the individual church, the Apostle addresses all subsequent ages of the Christian dispensation. It is the peculiarity of apostolic epistles that they are not confined, as to their meaning and general purposes, even to the persons to whom they were nominally addressed. To-day the young evangelist reads the Epistles

to Timothy and to Titus as if they had been written expressly to himself. The full local and personal allusions in these apostolic letters in no degree detract from their catholicity of spirit and their universality of application. To-day the elder minister who would deliver a charge to a newly-appointed brother would come to the Epistles to Timothy and Titus for the ground and basis of his best counsels and exhortations. This is the peculiarity of the whole Bible. With all its personality, and local limitation, and references to forgotten names and reconstructed places, there runs through the Bible a living stream of doctrine and illustration which will refresh the latest ages of the Church. This is one of the main arguments on behalf of the divine inspiration of the record which we regard as holy and final.

Verse 2: "Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Lilies from the garden of God! The apostles always created an atmosphere within which their letters were to be read. The

apostles gathered the Thessalonians into one loving body of redeemed men, and baptized them, so to say, with grace and peace from the unseen fountain of the infinite love. The benediction is the atmosphere in which the letter is to be read. I must apply this more and more to my own reading of the whole Scriptures. I must not come into this sanctuary with reckless feet, or with a mind stuffed with its own worthless vanities of criticism and speculation. I must enter the temple of Holy Scripture in the spirit which inspired it and sealed it to me and to every man as a special inheritance of the soul. What is the first verse in the Bible but another way of saying, "Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"? The whole Trinity is in the opening chapters of Genesis. Where the Trinity is, the benediction is. The benediction, therefore, is the spirit in which we must receive God's letters addressed to the need, the pain, and the sorrow of the heart. An impetuous piety might cut off all the salutations, benedictions, and greetings, under the impression that it was going into the very

centre of the matter revealed. This would be an infinite mistake. These apparently superfluous portions are essential to the colour, the atmosphere, and the emphasis of the whole revelation. Have I received this grace and peace into my own heart? Am I in constant and vital communication with the Eternal God? Am I living upon my own favour, am I trying to create my own peace, or do I go daily to the heavenly fountain, and moment by moment connect myself with the springs of heaven?

> Verse 3: "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth."

What a reputation to have! The reputation would be worth having if it were conferred by one of their own number, but being conferred by such men as Paul and Silvanus and Timotheus, how precious was the spiritual fame! We ourselves are bound to thank God for all good men, all wise teachers, all holy examples. How poor would the world be if we were to take out of its records the

influence of the very humblest workers who have accepted the service of Christ! The apostles, in effect, kept a record of the growth of Christianity in their day: how true it is that God Himself keeps a book of remembrance in which all our lives are traced with the pen of justice held by the hand of forbearing mercy! The Thessalonians had so lived as to create a fame extending far beyond their own local boundaries. We create the best fame when we pay no attention to it; ever-toiling, ever-hoping love will bring the soul all the fame that is due to it. The Thessalonians were not to be kept within bounds; that is the literal meaning of the words "groweth exceedingly." They were as branches that grew beyond the walls of their own enclosure; they were as an overflowing stream refreshing the lands beyond. Nor was it a growth or a blessing of this kind only; the great public influence was to be accounted for in no small measure by the internal charity of the Thessalonian brethren. They were good at home, therefore, they had fame abroad. "The charity of every one of you all toward each other

aboundeth"—where this is the home record, the foreign reputation will take its scope and quality from it. How pitiable it is for any man to have a great public reputation and to have but a mean or unworthy record at home! "Other vineyards have I kept, mine own vineyard have I not kept." This was not so with the Thessalonians, for each emulated the love and the service of the other. Here I might pierce my heart with many a severe question. Have I been wanting in love to my brethren? Have I filled my own house with the spirit of love? Do servants and children think the house sweeter and better because I am in it? If a man fail in love, surely he fails altogether, though he speak with many tongues, and can cast his prophetic spirit over the centuries to come.

> Verse 4: "So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure."

In this way we may do good even to the greatest men: we encourage them in their work; we confirm them in their faith; we

stir them up to more heroic endurance. The churches were the best commendation of the Apostles. They had no written certificates to carry them from city to city or from land to land; but they could point to their converts, and say, in the name of Jesus Christ, "Behold, the value and extent of our holy work." Wonderful is the power of example and influence in encouraging other men, and thus multiplying their ministry. The writer to the Hebrews became quite exultant when he recalled the names of Gedeon, and Barak, Samson, and Jephthae, David also, and Samuel! Thus we live in one another and for one another. As we recall the past in an appreciative and grateful spirit, we best prepare for an unknown future.

The Thessalonians did not live a contemplative and luxurious life, one man excelling another in poetic phraseology, or in colour and tuneful dreams. Far from it. The record is one of "tribulations that ye endure." It was precisely so in the olden time. The great souls of yesterday "through faith

subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." This is but an expansion of verse 4. If we could read "patience," "faith," "persecutions" aright, we should see in the depths of these historical terms the whole tragedy of suffering in the name of God and for the sake of Christ. We say, "Happy is the nation that has no annals," but we cannot say so of the Christian Church. Poor is the church whose history is not written in trouble and defeat, in fear and in sorrow of divers kinds. Our experience is our strength. Poor is the soul that has had no trial of patience and faith, and that has never tasted the bitterness of persecutions and tribulations. This is one of the very glories of Christ Himself, that He was made perfect through suffering. "Consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds."

Verse 5: "Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer."

If we read "persecution" aright, we shall see that it is only preparing itself for the righteous judgment of God. The Apostles would never allow their converts to be scared by their adversaries. In writing to the Philippians, Paul says, "In nothing terrified by your adversaries"—that is, affrighted, scared, alarmed; be perfectly calm in the presence of the fiercest opposition. The great object which the soul must have constantly in view is that it "may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer." Jesus Christ said the same thing when he pronounced the Beatitude "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The Apostle Peter waxed eloquent when he thought of subdued opposition and sanctified affliction: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice,

inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1 Peter iv. 12, 13). This is not the only occasion in which the Apostle Paul cheers heroic sufferers: "It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with Him" (2 Tim. ii. 11, 12). James would have sufferers for Christ's sake count it all joy when they fall into divers trials, because he knows that one virtue prepares the way for another, and that the end of all trial is the soul's completeness in Christ. The apostles laid it down as a fundamental truth in Christian experience that "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." This is true of every kingdom that is worth entering. We must in some sense pay the price for all our culture, strength, influence. It is a mistake to limit the word "price" to money, or to construe "pay" as a commercial transaction. "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." If we continue with Christ in his temptations, He

will appoint unto us a kingdom; in other words, if we suffer, we shall also reign with Him.

> Verse 6: "Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you."

Christians are in the charge of Christ. He knows every trouble that they bear. He knows when they are utterly overcome by fatigue, when they can no longer run as strong men, but "pursue," though with faintness. He who smites the Christian smites Christ, and God will see that the smiter himself is smitten, not for the mere sake of avenging insult, but for the man's own sake,that he may see how much it means to fight against the living Lord. Let us rest in the confidence that vengeance is God's, and he will repay. "For thus saith the Lord of hosts; After the glory hath He sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of His eye" (Zech. ii. 8).

> Verse 7: "And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels."

The apostles do not separate themselves

from the common Christian life of the churches, hence the expression "with us." "Rest" is a term which admits of many applications—peace of mind, deliverance from anxiety, the sleep of death, the sabbath of untroubled confidence. The apostles had no doubt as to the living personality of the Lord Jesus. To them the Saviour was not only an inspiring memory, or a hallowing influence—He was a distinct being, a personality about whose identity there could be no possible mistake. The Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in many ways. This is characteristic of the divine revelation from age to age. God came in fire, in wind, in sudden and uplifting inspirations, in a still small voice, anonymously in his wrestling with Jacob, almost literally in his talking to Moses and the prophets. Fire is a favourite symbol of the divine revelation: "The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God" (1 Thess. iv. 16); "The Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall

cast them into a furnace of fire" (Matt. xiii. 41, 42).

> Verse 8: "In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Bible has never disguised the fact that when the Lord Jesus comes it will be a fearful day for the sinner. We are to understand these terms as inflicting the severest spiritual punishment upon the soul. Regard fire as a symbol, and out of it will come all the appalling suggestions associated with the judicial term. For a time the Lord Jesus accepts his rejection with serenity and even with sorrowful acquiescence. Passages of this kind should be contrasted with passages of the opposite nature, such as, "I am meek and lowly in heart"; "When He was reviled, He reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not"; "He gave His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair." Side by side with such tender descriptions of the Saviour's forbearance and meekness set passages which seem to be aflame with holy indignation: "Behold, the

Lord will come with fire, and with His chariots like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire"; "A certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries"; "For our God is a consuming fire"; "The heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men"; "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God"; "Tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile." From these passages we learn how great must have been the suffering of God and of His Son in the face of our rebellion, ingratitude, and rejection of his offered love. We require such passages to give us some idea of God's conception of the Cross. It was from no superficial punishment that God sought to preserve us. He knew the result, the natural and inevitable result, of hardheartedness and unbelief; and only at the last, so to say, when he was forced to bring the argument of consequences to bear

upon us, did He speak of all this fire, and darkness, and torment. A right reading of God's mercy will give us also a right reading of our own sin. What must sin be when it cost the Eternal God so much to remove it from the world which it disgraced and disennobled!

> Verse 9: "Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power."

This is the punishment of deprivation! To be shut out of God's presence, to be turned away from the light, to have no share in the bounty of noonday—these are deprivations so complete as to amount to a positive penalty. Surely intimations of this kind should have a deterrent effect upon sinful souls. "These shall go away into everlasting punishment." "He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever." What, then, must sin be! It is no problem in ethics, it is no temporary lapse or defect of harmony; it is a cruel wound

inflicted upon the heart of infinite love. What, then, must be their joy who are delivered from all this sorrow and are called into the kingdom of light and peace! "In Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." Trifle with these words as we may, there they remain, representing the saddest tragedy in the universe. It may suit us in some moods to ignore the appalling side of things, but they are wise who look at that side steadily, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. Whatever the destiny of the wicked may be, the Bible never associates it with anything that is not terror-inspiring and unspeakably appalling. "They shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His majesty, when He ariseth to shake terribly the earth" (Isa. ii. 19). "Behold, He cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him. Even so, Amen" (Rev. i. 7). It is one of two things when Christ comes to us—He brings salvation or destruction.

The Gospel is a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death. "A Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth." My soul, come not thou into the secret of these experiences! I must not fritter away my time in speculating upon the destiny of the wicked; I must devote myself heart and soul to the obedience of the Gospel. The mysteries of destiny are not to be solved by intellectual speculation. We are to serve the Son, and kiss His lips lest He be angry with us, and we perish from the way when his wrath is kindled but a little.

Verse 10: "When He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day."

To the Egyptians the presence of God was one thing, to Israel quite another. So it shall be in the coming of our Lord. To His enemies how great a terror! to us who expect Him with all the ardour of love what an unspeakable joy! Christ shall not be left

destitute in the winding up of the economies and dispensations of time. "Lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts,and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever." The Church is the glory of Christ. Did not the Apostle mean the same thing when he said, "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For ye are our glory and joy"? Shall I be a gem in the crown of my Saviour? Shall I be recognised by Him when He brings His final criticism to bear upon the history of men? Shall I by His own love be made worthy of a place at His feet? These

are the questions which should purify motive and elevate conduct to its highest level.

> Verses 11, 12: "Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power: that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

What is to be the outcome of persecution and tribulation such as we have read of in verse 4? Jesus saw beyond all the suffering. He endured the cross, despising the shame; and from afar He saw the gathered Church, with the blood mark upon it, the sign of redemption and the seal of acceptance. Only let us give ourselves up to God that He may fulfil all the good pleasure of His goodness, and the work of faith with power. Our own little works are not to be the measure of the final glory with which Christ shall crown our lives. "Not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace." We are to think of God as having predetermined all things, and as never for a moment sharing His throne or sceptre with any rival power. We are to think of Him as "having

predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (Eph. i. 5). This issue is worth fighting for and waiting for. We are apt to be impatient by the slowness of time and the disappointment of narrow calculations. We are to live in the grace of God. We are to nestle in the heart of the infinite mercy. Then, come the day of revelation when it may, it will bring with it a morning which no night shall displace—an infinite calm which no storm can trouble.

CHAPTER II

Verse 1: "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him."

THUS the Apostle turns the uppermost thought of the Thessalonians to advantage, making many practical possibilities turn upon it. There can be no doubt that the Thessalonians were in some way expecting the coming of the Lord—the Apostle does not avail himself of any ambiguous metaphor in setting forth that great event in Christian history. This is no uncommon idea in the New Testament. "Exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (Heb. x. 25). Indeed, in the first Epistle addressed to the Thessalonian church the matter is referred to in equally definite terms. "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice

of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. iv. 16, 17). There is a sense in which we may daily expect the coming of the Lord; so comforted am I by this reflection that I do not concern myself with specific dates—the date may interfere with the spiritual significance of the event. It is enough for my heart to know that the Lord, in His own way, and at His own time, will come to claim his own people. Whilst we are calculating dates we may be sacrificing opportunities of doing good. Speculation has its bounds; but service has its immediate responsibilities. I will sit on the steps of the sanctuary until the Lord Himself is pleased to open the door and shed upon me the light of His countenance.

Verse 2: "That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand."

What a penetrating estimate of the whole

possibility! The very comforts of the Christian may be turned into troubles by mischievous men. They will suggest, or invent, or misapply, or in any way pervert both the word and the work of God so as to unsettle the faith of the Christian. On all subjects so delicate there may be advisers whom God has called into His counsels, or put in charge of His revelations. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John iv. 1). The Lord Himself foresaw that certain perverse minds would take advantage of His promise to come again and unsettle the faith and hope of many. "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in My name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet" (Matt. xxiv. 4–6). The coming of Christ, even in the first instance, was not made matter of date, but was hidden in the heart of man as a great expectation and a daily stimulus to

faith and hope. So it is with the second coming. Certain great events have to take place before the Lord shall reappear. "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matt. xxiv. 14). This expectation has maintained the courage of the Church from century to century. "We, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter iii. 13). We are not to allow ourselves to be disturbed and troubled upon the matter of our Lord's reappearance; the soul is to rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. The best way to prepare for the Second Advent of Christ is by doing the duty which lies to our hand, assured that when the Lord comes that servant will be blessed who is found waiting, doing his Lord's will, and lovingly cherishing the Lord's promise. This is my faith. Here my soul rests amid all the clouds, vexations, and trials of this present time. Centuries are much to me, but they are less than a moment to the living God; to Him a thousand years are as one day, and one day

is as a thousand years. A false estimate will disable us for the true interpretation of God's purposes and God's promises.

> Verse 3: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition."

The Apostle always kept his eyes on the possibility that deceivers would arise to vex the church. The apostles did not necessarily expect the Lord even in their own time, though many of their words on a superficial glance would countenance the idea that He might come at any moment. An assurance such as we find in this verse plainly indicates that many things were to happen before the second coming of the Son of man. Notably there was to be a great apostasy; there was also to be a great revelation of the image and influence of evil. "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from

meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth" (1 Tim. iv. 1–3). What an unspeakable comfort it is to know that even apostasies are calculated in the divine scheme and evolution of things! Nothing happens that has not been foreseen and, as it were, arranged for. The devil is to be seen in all his naked hideousness, the spirit of evil is to do its worst. Greater things have yet to be seen in the realm of evil. When the enemy has come to the end of his chain he is to be bruised and destroyed. "Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light." We read of some evil influences which are described as "the spirits of devils working miracles." "There shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect." The intensest darkness proverbially precedes the dawn.

> Verse 4: "Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped: so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."

Speculation about the "man of sin," or

"the son of perdition, who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped," is to a large extent unprofitable. Let us keep to the facts with which we are only too painfully familiar—that is to say, to the destructive influences which are continually at work in our own hearts. Whilst we are going in search of speculative answers to mysterious questions the enemy may be working havoc in our own souls. This is the spiritual position which I desire to maintain. If there are peculiarly gifted or specially inspired persons who can see into the secret ways of God, let them speak with a due sense of responsibility; but as for those of us to whom no such gift has been entrusted, let us keep our hearts with all diligence, and serve in love where we cannot speak in the spirit of prophecy. There must be no self-exaltation; there must be no endeavour to oust the living God from His own throne, or from His own temple. We must live in humbleness and gravity of mind; then the day can bring us no surprise that will unsettle our faith, and no cloud that can blot out our hope.

> Verses 5–7: "Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way."

These are words of supreme mystery which we cannot literally interpret. Yet we can appreciate their spiritual idealism. The language is strange to us, and yet it seems clearly to express the pain created by some burden and torment of personal experience. There are voices in the air we cannot interpret. Many an effect cannot be traced to its hidden cause. There is undoubtedly a mystery of iniquity working in the motives, the policies, the ambitions, and even in the prayers of men. The devil will die hard. We have certain great rules by which to determine our own conduct. "Every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world" (1 John iv. 3). In the Second Epistle of Peter the strongest language is used respecting the apostasy: "There shall

be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways" (2 Peter ii. 1, 2). Many of these passages must be regarded ideally, rather than literally and narrowly. The soul will be able to read the meaning which is hidden within the shell of the letter. We know what it is to be spiritually seduced; let us beware lest we make a mystery of our own backsliding, wondering what it is and shirking responsibility for its occurrence when we know perfectly well that the reason is hidden in the iniquity of our own hearts.

> Verses 8–10: "And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved."

As well attempt to describe in words all the mysteries of light and shade which are hidden

in the incalculable movements and changes of the clouds. A strong metaphor is that which represents the personality of "that Wicked." The deepest mysteries of God can only be hinted at by strong metaphors and graphic analogies. The "Wicked" has been seen through many ages by the spiritual intuition of the sons of God. "The beast was slain, and his body destroyed and given to the burning flame." But never has the "Wicked" been represented as greater than God. The existence of the "Wicked" has not been denied, but the Spirit and power of God have been set in glorious contrast to all that is called evil and destructive. History is the thrilling record of the perpetual contest between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, heaven and hell. God ultimately prevails. "The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. iv. 12). Who can stand before Him whose name is "Faithful and True," whose eyes are as

a flame of fire, on whose head are many crowns, and whose written name no man but Himself can read? The Bible is full of assurance that God, and not the devil, shall ultimately prevail. The great spirit of Victory is clothed with a vesture dipped in blood, and is followed by the armies of heaven clothed in fine linen, white and clean. "Out of His mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations." Let there be no mistake about this whole matter: the evil will come, the "Wicked" will be revealed, the mystery of iniquity will work, and the son of perdition shall be recognised. Our trust is in the Lord who came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir: the Lord who shone from Mount Paran, who came with ten thousands of saints, and out of whose right hand there went a fiery law. In what sanctuaries of rock has the Lord hidden His people? He has housed them in the granite and set around them flaming swords. "He shall smite the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips shall He slay the wicked." They who fight against God shall be trodden under foot

and their dust shall be thrown upon the stormy wind.

Note in verse 10 the striking expression "deceivableness of unrighteousness." Note the charge that is brought against the evil-minded: "They received not the love of the truth." Observe what gracious opportunities had been created for them, and the Lord had brought them His Gospel, so to say, with His own lips: "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John iii. 19).

> Verses 11, 12: "And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

This is one of the most solemn mysteries of life. Observe that God states the cause of His action. He had to deal with the very spirit of evil. The utmost cunning and falsehood of the spirit of wickedness had to be encountered and destroyed. God has been so provoked in His people that in the very

act of answering their prayers He has destroyed their souls. "My people would not hearken to My voice; and Israel would none of me." What was the result of such rebellion? God gave them up unto their own hearts' lust, and they walked in their own counsels. This has always been the course which even the divine mercy has pursued. God's Spirit did not always strive with men; He retired, as it were, baffled and disappointed. Nevertheless God's judgment prevailed where His Spirit was quenched. "As they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind" (Rom. i. 28). There is no punishment so inconceivably appalling as that man should be brought under the dominion of strong delusions. This is lunacy of the most appalling sort. Let us pray God to keep us out of such intolerable darkness! To believe that wrong is right, to believe that blasphemy is prayer, to regard the rising of the sun as the reign of darkness—what can be more terrible, what can be more like the horrors of perdition! Oh that my mind may be kept simple, childlike, ever trustful in God! I

have heard that God may grant a man the desire of his heart and then send leanness upon his soul. Oh that God would take the evil out of my prayers, the selfishness out of my aspirations, the falsehood out of my vows!

> Verse 13: "But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth."

Amid all the clouds there is one speck of blue! However many may be the enemies gathered in anger and hate around the cross of Christ, there are some steadfast hearts who love the Christ and will not forsake the standard. This is the miracle of God. This is no mere fancy-work on the part of the Thessalonian believers; it is the perfecting of a divine purpose. The Apostle in his first letter gives the true key to the meaning of his congratulation and confidence: "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God." The Apostle would never have it that things come and go within some small circle of their own, nor would he for a moment tolerate the doctrine that the Church is left

at the mercy of whims, inventions, and clever conjectures of men. This is the true explanation: "He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love" (Eph. i. 4). Christians are not mere accidents; faith is no straw blown about by shifting winds. "Whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified" (Rom. viii. 29, 30). How this explanation covers the whole ground and fills the whole firmament with morning light! The Apostle does not praise the Thessalonians—he praises God. He thanks God for the Thessalonians as he might thank God for an abundant harvest. The sinner is saved by grace—in grace he must stand. No other lamp can light him through the wilderness; no other power can bear him through the swellings of Jordan.

Verse 14: "Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The consummation of freedom and blessedness is traced to the Gospel. First the law,

then the love, then the glory! We have to make our calling and election sure. "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity." Discipleship must always carry its own broad and decisive proofs. "Walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto His kingdom and glory." Do not so much tell people that you are called unto eternal glory by Christ Jesus as live in such a manner that they themselves will be constrained to acknowledge that within you and behind you is the whole strength of God. Observe what it is to which the Thessalonians were called. That is given in verse 13: "chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth." Holiness is the best defence of Christianity. Words are poor compared with the evidence of a pure, true, simple, tender love.

Verse 15: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."

This is the point to which it all comes: "Stand fast." This is a favourite term with

the Apostle. It is full of military fire and precision. The Apostle uses the word in the First Epistle and in the Second Epistle, so that there might be no mistake about the austerity and the soldierly command. The Apostle used the same term in writing to the Corinthians: "Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong." The same term is used in the letter to the Philippians: "My brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved." There must be no wavering. On all moral questions and in all moral conduct men must know where to find the Christian. He abides by the law of Christ and works out that law in the Spirit of Christ, so that there can be no mistake as to the tone of his mind and the meaning of his actions.

> Verses 16, 17: "Now our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work."

The Apostle would comfort the Thessalonians with an infinite fulness of consolation.

The Lord works in His people the virtue of steadfastness. We stand fast as a reward of our prayers and a daily sealing of our adoption into the family of God. The Apostle takes the Thessalonians to a broad, deep, overflowing river, and tells them that the mighty stream is but a poor symbol of the greater river which takes its rise in the heart of God. The stars are not so sure in their places as are the souls that stand fast in the faith and comfort of the Gospel. "Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood," be the glory of our steadfastness. Once more the Apostle conducts the Thessalonians to the true sanctuary and to its inmost altar red with love-speaking blood, and above it the guarding seraphim. "Hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." When the Apostle Paul speaks of comfort he speaks in the very tone of his Master and Lord: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me." We must be stablished in every good word and work; we may reverse the terms, and say, "in every

good work and word." The Apostle desires no human comfort for faithful but persecuted souls; he commits such souls to "the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort." The Apostle has no doubt of the great issue; the sons of God shall be brought in triumph and in completeness to the sanctuary which is above. God will lose none from His holy keeping. "He shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Sooner shall the enemy tear up the mountains and scatter the very stars of night than he shall unsettle the souls stablished in grace and fortified by the living Word. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" "If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." The persecutors are many, the temptations are manifold, the fiery darts come down upon us in showers—and yet greater is He that is with us than any who can be against us. Though for Christ's sake we are killed all the day long, and are counted as sheep for the slaughter, yet in all these things are

we more than conquerors through Him that loved us. Let us sing our song of faith and hope so loudly that even the enemy may hear it and may be discouraged because of our daily access of confidence in God.

CHAPTER III

Verse 1: "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you."

SO the less may serve the greater. Only the most deeply experienced can set a proper value upon the efficacy of prayer. Science is daily teaching us that the voice produces wonderful effects upon the air and upon natural substances, so much so that the sound of the voice can change the colour and the form of things. We have never brought our conception of prayer within the possibility of such definite influence. Apply the teaching of science to the doctrine of prayer. Who knows what miracles are being wrought upon natural substances, upon the hearts of others, upon the heart of God, by incessant and fervent prayer? The Apostle Paul loved to be prayed for, and in thus beseeching the

churches to remember him in intercession he almost invested the humblest member of the household of Christ with a new function and a special ministry. The Apostle did not deign to disregard the prayers of the poorest for his own personal protection and comfort, but he specially desired the supplication of the saints on behalf of the Gospel itself, that it might spread over all the world. He would have all people be, as it were, reproductions of the Thessalonians, who had provided an open door for the evangelical message, and had in their own persons so glowingly illustrated the power of the Gospel that others might reproduce the Thessalonian example, and rest sure that in going in the direction of the Thessalonians they were pursuing the right way. What a tribute was this to the excellence of the Thessalonian Christians! How the Apostle Paul delighted in the practice of prayer and in enjoining it upon the churches! "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (Eph. vi. 18). "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing

by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. iv. 6). To the Thessalonians he said, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. v. 17). Jesus Christ Himself had enjoined upon His disciples the duty of prayer: "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke xviii. 1). "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation" (Matt. xxvi. 41). "Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth labourers into His harvest" (Matt. ix. 38). The Apostle had confidence that by the prayers of the saints his ministry would be brought to the highest issues: "Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me" (Rom. xv. 30). In writing to the Colossians he desired a special interest in their prayers for the same purpose: "Praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak of the mystery of Christ" (Col. iv. 3). If a great man like the Apostle Paul could not dispense with the prayers of Christians, ought not I to encourage the offering of such

prayers on my own account? When men pray for their ministers they cannot undervalue their labours. They should regard such labours as an answer to their own prayers. Having sown the seed of prayer, they should expect the harvest of profitable service.

> Verse 2: "And that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith."

The term "unreasonable" does not refer so much to its intellectual aspects as to some species of moral deformity. We might read, that we may be delivered from "monstrous men"—men whose excited and exaggerated notion of things disturbs the steady flow of honest service. You may injure the reputation of a minister in a foolish attempt to exaggerate it. By irrationally exciting expectation men do but encourage disappointment. We are to expect from our ministers the best their abilities can render, but we have not any right to exact from them monstrous, exaggerated, and fantastic service. The Apostle reminds the Thessalonians that all men have not faith. Even some who

profess to be Christians may be only intellectualists, or theorists, or inventors of fables. Where there is true faith there will be gravity and soberness of expectation. "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. ii. 8).

Verse 3: "But the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil."

That is the sanctuary in which the soul must live. We must not look to the provisions of man, but to the statutes and promises of God. We live within the fortress of a divine covenant. Look at the strength of the walls which surround the soul! We do not make our own security; our builder and maker is God. "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. x. 13). Do not look at your own resources, do not dwell upon your own infirmities: look unto the hills whence cometh your help; your help cometh from the Lord of hosts, and you know how

great is His strength, for He made heaven and earth. "The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished" (2 Peter ii. 9). The soul of the believer is as a city guarded by impregnable rocks. He may have dark days, and days of storm, and times of mental depression, nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, "the Lord knoweth them that are His." Under such circumstances persecution itself brings with it a kind of joy, for it reveals the infinite resources, the unsearchable riches, available to the Christian. Not until we have exhausted God need we give ourselves up to the darkness of despair.

> Verses 4, 5: "And we have confidence in the Lord touching you, that ye both do and will do the things which we command you. And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ."

Encouragement upon encouragement! God Himself gives rich consolation by the way, as if to make heaven itself less and less of a surprise to the chastened and sanctified soul. "The fruit of the Spirit is love." "Praying

in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God." How we must persevere! "Do and will do" is a wonderful word of encouragement. Always remember that the King is coming nearer and nearer: "The Lord will suddenly come to His temple"—suddenly, that is, to our ignorance, but not suddenly in His own slowly developing purpose. "Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh" (James v. 7, 8). The Christian has all history to fall back upon in illustration of the divine Spirit and the divine method in personal and universal providence: "Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience" (James v. 10). The people of God have never hesitated to confess that affliction has been good for them and that loss has been turned into gain. The Psalmist said, "Blessed is the man whom Thou

chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of Thy law" (Ps. xciv. 12). Jesus Christ said, "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Matt. x. 22). The Apostle Paul himself said, "To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life" (Rom. ii. 7). There are some men in whom we have such confidence that if they were to give way or in any degree succumb to the evil one, we should feel that the very foundations of society were shaken. It was some such confidence that the Apostle Paul had in the Thessalonian Christians: "We have confidence." What a tribute, what an expectation, what a responsibility! Yet all this confidence is "in the Lord." This is not merely a personal confidence; it is a recognition of the divine grace in believing hearts. May God make us as trustees of His Word, stewards of His mysteries, written epistle of His election and His love! There is a silent preaching, an eloquent experience, a daily, simple, incorruptible faithfulness.

Verse 6: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us."

Even the best of men may be tainted by the near approach of those who are evil-minded: "Evil communications corrupt good manners." Let us cut ourselves off from all persons who are light-minded, or whose hearts incline them to vanity rather than to prayer: "I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. . . . Them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (1 Cor. v. 11, 13). If a limb is mortified, it must be cut off. If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off; or thy right eye, pluck it out. "I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Rom. xvi. 17).

Verses 7–10: "For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly

> among you; neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an example unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat."

There can be no doubt as to the austerity of apostolic discipline. One of the virtues which is less prominent in the Church than in ancient days is the virtue of discipline. The apostles were able to point to themselves as illustrations of their own doctrine. Already the Apostle had said to the Thessalonians, "Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe" (1 Thess. ii. 10). The apostles did not make a livelihood out of the Gospel; they were hard-working men. Hard work is one of the securities of society, and certainly it is one of the defences of the Church. "Ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me" (Acts xx. 34). The apostles taught the doctrine that the labourer was

worthy of his hire, and yet there were circumstances under which they preferred to labour with their own hands. "Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ." The Saviour Himself laid down the doctrine, "The workman is worthy of his meat." Yet there were times when the apostles endeavoured to avert misconstruction by trusting to their own hands rather than to alms to which they were rightly entitled. "When I was present with you, and wanted, I was chargeable to no man. . . . But what I do, that I will do, that I may cut off occasion from them which desire occasion" (2 Cor. xi. 9, 12). The Apostle had a clear doctrine of socialism, and that doctrine should be more broadly and energeticaliy declared to-day: "We commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat." The Apostle believed in a man earning his own daily bread. He neither believed in stealing nor in indiscriminate almsgiving. "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that

needeth" (Eph. iv. 28). We should not live on the alms of others; we should so work that we may be able to give alms to persons who know the bitterness of poverty.

Verses 11, 12: "For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread."

The Apostle was no inattentive observer of the moral faithfulness of the churches. He had heard of the busybodies—that is, of persons who were hostile to society and who wished to have all things without working for any of them. A man who is not willing to work for what he eats is in spirit an anarchist, an enemy of social law and order, and as such should be expelled from the confidence of the society he would destroy. Christianity has its quiet service. We are not all called to public life, to bear the light of high noon. "Study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands."

Verses 13–15: "But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. And if any man obey not our word

by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

Be not weary in civility, in courtesy, in well-pleasing. The Apostle had given the same instructions in his Epistle to the Galatians: "Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Gal. vi. 9). There is a well-doing that is severe in its faithfulness, and there is another well-doing which, without abating anything of its austerity, is gracious, courteous, considerate of the rights and liberties of others. The Apostles did not write letters merely as friendly correspondents; they wrote in an official capacity expressing the inspiration with which God by His Holy Spirit had filled their hearts. "This epistle" is not a mere friendly note—it comes with all the authority of apostolic office and experience. There is a time when evil desires must be cut off. There is an hour in which we must bid farewell to those who have sought to seduce us from obedience to the Gospel. Yet in all this process of excision there is to be nothing of hatred or bitterness. The true thought

was expressed even in the Levitical law, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him" (Lev. xix. 17). How wondrously judgment was mingled with mercy in these apostolic expositions and applications of Christian discipline! "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. vi. 1).

> Verses 16–18: "Now the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all. The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."

Back again to God! Another word for God! Another commendation to the Lord! More and more blessing from on high! "Live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you" (2 Cor. xiii. 11). Recall the great benediction, "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord

lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" (Num. vi. 24–26). Live in that crystal sanctuary—get into the center of that ineffable peace, and the enemy shall have no power to imperil the soul. More peace to you, and more! May the Lord make the walls of your security sevenfold in thickness! May He so found you upon the rock of His own grace that the gates of hell may not prevail against you! Another salutation—with this rugged hand of mine—another sweet prayer for your comfort and joy! Silver and gold have I none, but the Lord has made me strong in prayer, and has gathered me very closely within the folds of His own heart, and from that, the best of all environments, I say again and finally, The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.